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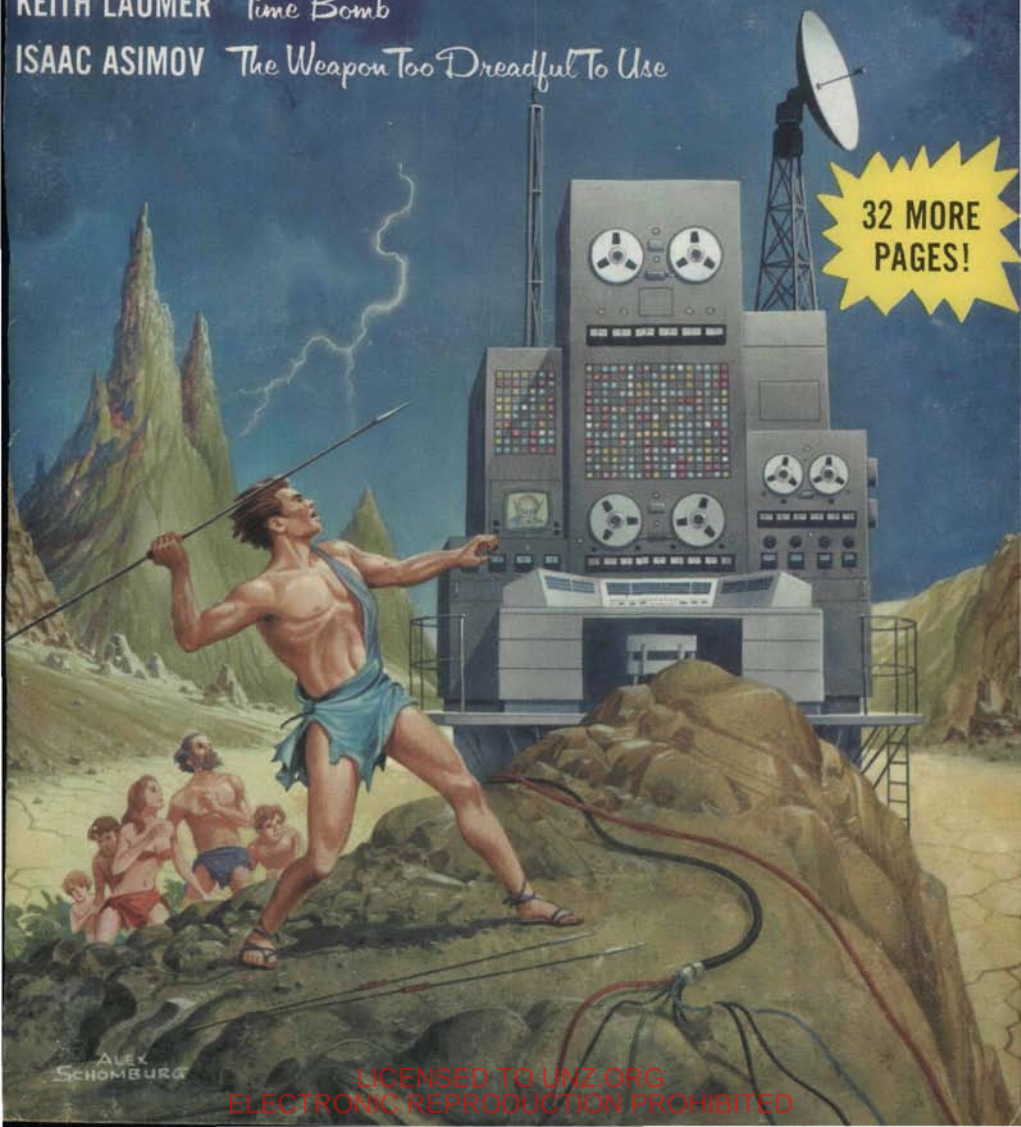
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EDITORIAL | From the Publisher

JUST before these lines were written, two Russian cosmonauts made a fiery re-entry through the atmosphere and a harrowing planet-fall in the snow-clad forest slopes of the northern Ural Mountains. One of them, Lieut. Col. Aleksei A. Leonov, became the first man to float freely in space, protected only by his silver-coated spacesuit. Just a few days ago two of our own astronauts, Virgil Grissom and John Young, successfully completed a three-orbit Gemini mission during which they repeatedly changed the capsule's orbit, thereby demonstrating that man can maneuver in space (an important breakthrough for our Moon project, which depends upon a feasible rendezvous system for joining spacecraft in orbit). And just today Ranger 9 crashed into the crater Alphonsus after flashing back to Earth 5,814 close-ups of the Lunar surface, some of which show details suggesting volcanic activity within the Moon (a discovery which, if confirmed, would mean that astronomers may have to revise some of their thinking on the nature and origin of the *Earth* as well as the Moon).

And by the time this issue is on the stands, what new space achievements will we have read about? Many more, no doubt, some of them probably so spectacular that a few more critics—and a few more readers—will again begin to claim that science has not only caught up with but *passed* science fiction. (Remember what we heard after the Bomb was first dropped—and, more recently, what the sons of Sputnik would do to the fading wonder of science fiction?) But such claims are apparently based on a very limited view of the real nature of the field. They tend to over-emphasize the *science* in science fiction at the expense of the *fiction*, and that is a curious way to regard what is (at least when our authors are at their best) a branch of literature. (Mainstream critics, please stay out of this.)

Suppose, then, that we accept the following as a general definition of science fiction: that it is a form of *fiction* which speculates on what might happen *if* . . . with that *if* usually involving some scientific premise not yet based in reality but still waiting on the edge of possibility. Suppose we also remember that ever since 1926, when Hugo Gernsback created the first science-fiction magazine (and the

(continued on page 162)

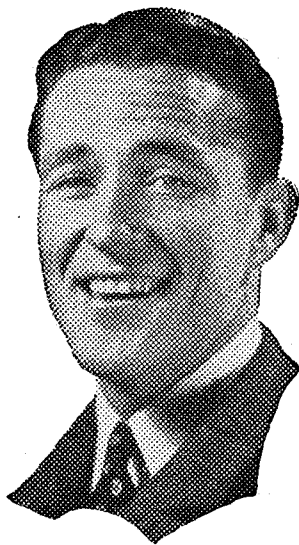
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TIME BOMB

By KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by NODEL



Man's Galactic Empire has shrunk to a mere 2,000 cubic light-years of space—but what of it? Doesn't Mankind live in peace and harmony with the strange Tewks? But on a far out-world time is running out —because the Barrier is down, and Yonder the hunter has set out to learn what lies beyond.



THE sentry by the watch-fire cocked his crossbow, listening for the sound that had brought him out of a light doze. He jumped as a handful of tossed pebbles clattered in the hard-packed dirt at his feet.

"Who's that?" He stared out into the darkness with the dying fire at his back.

A man came into the circle of the firelight; he was dressed in a leather kilt and a ragged fur cape; his brown hair was untrimmed, and two weeks' growth of stubble darkened his jaw. There was a bow slung over his shoulder, and a knife in a sheath was strapped to his hip. Below the powerful muscles of his chest, his ribs showed gauntly.

"Yondor!" The sentry lowered his weapon. "We gave you up for dead ten days ago."

The man called Yondor came up to the fire; the reddish glow flickered against his face as the cold wind fanned the embers; under the lines of fatigue his features were those of a young man.

"Ten days ago I nearly was," he said flatly.

"You look like you've had a rough time. You're down to skin and bones."

Yondor nodded, looking into the fire.

The sentry looked at him obliquely. "Find anything?" he inquired casually.

"The Barrier's down." Yondor spoke equally casually. The sentry nodded, then crinkled his eyes in a frown. He was a man of forty, weather-beaten, running to fat now at the waistline.

"Hell, it can't be," he stated, sounding almost angry.

Yondor moved past the fire toward the huts of the village. "Keep your eyes open, Hush," he said. "There's a pack of wolcats hunting the valley tonight." The sentry called after him, but he went on, past the darkened shelters built of twigs and mud, along the short village street to the oversized hut built at its end. He ducked his head to pass the leather-hung entrance, narrowed his eyes against the bright glare of the interior. A big man with thick yellowish-white hair and deep furrows beside a hawk-nose looked up from a heap of chipped stones he had been sorting into piles. A short mantle patched from worn grey cloth was draped across massive shoulders tanned by exposure to wind and sun; a row of welted scars across his left deltoid and biceps stood out pale against the skin. Two small metal ornaments in the shape of birds with spread wings hung from a thong around his massive neck. Behind him, a small fire burned on a mud-brick hearth, picking out dull highlights on the loops of tarnished gold braid stitched to the ragged mantle. He

looked at Yondor with no change in his expression.

"Well, you're back," he growled.

Yondor unslung his bow, sat down at the bench across the table from the other. He looked at the row of books on the uneven shelf against the mud-plaster wall, the two narrow bunks—mere frames of split saplings heaped with brush and covered with hides—the age-blackened metal objects ranged on a high shelf just under the sagging thatch of the roof. A thick, brown candle on the table made black shadows in the corners.

"You look bad," the white-haired man grunted with the corners of his mouth pulled down. He pushed across an earthenware dish with a lump of yellow cheese, reached under the table and brought up a clay bottle, put it beside the dish.

"How soon can we strike camp?" Yondor pared off a lump of cheese, his eyes on the other's face.

"Strike camp?" the older man repeated. He leaned across the table. "Any other suggestions?"

"It's not a suggestion," Yondor said.

THE big man's fist struck the table hard enough to make the flints jump with a glassy tinkle.

"I'm still Captain here, Boy," he barked.

"It's ten days' march to the Barrier," Yondor said as though the other hadn't spoken.

"And?" The older man's eyes were hot on Yondor's face.

"We can be ready to move out in twenty-four hours."

The tendons at the Captain's temples moved as his jaw tensed. "You were out too long," he said between his teeth. "You've lost your wits."

Yondor ignored the interruption. "I found the North Plain clear of snow. I crossed the foothills of the Old Range in two days, without chipping ice. The bog almost stopped me; I had to build a raft to cross it. It was melted clear."

The old man nodded. "It's been thawing since I was a boy. What about it?"

When I reached the Long Slope, I found a new river. It was difficult going; the mountainside is cut into gullies, and the gullies are jammed with boulders and driftwood." Yondor touched his thigh. "I twisted my leg; I had to lie up for a week. Then I finished the climb in a day."

"So?"

"The glacier's melted and dumped its load of boulders down the mountain. The pass is clear. A child could walk through it."

"And—did you . . . ?" The old man looked piercingly at Yondor. He nodded.

"Well?"

"A high plateau, with a ring-wall. There's a lot of rubble, glacial debris—"

"No . . . structures?"

Yondor shook his head. "The glacier would have cleared anything built above bedrock level."

The captain let out his breath in a hissing sigh. "Then there's nothing there. . . ."

"Most of the installation was underground—"

THE old man grunted. "Your faith feeds on air, Yondor. It's time you faced reality."

Yonder rose, went to the shelf, took out a slim, black-bound book; the pages were filled with lines of hand-written script.

"The Log is clear enough," he said. "It tells us to go back—"

"It's an allegory—a cautionary tale," the old man said. "Not meant to be taken literally. The Station represents the unattainable ideal, from which our ancestors were cast out; the Barrier is a symbol of all the things that are beyond man's reach—"

"And now the Barrier's down—"

"What do you want to do, tell them that?" The Captain waved a hand toward the sleeping village. "There are eighteen hundred people out there; the Station is an article of faith with them—"

"And with me," Yondor said.

"We have security here, Yondor," the old man said. "Water, timber, good hunting—enough to survive—as long as we can go on believing that some day we'll regain our lost paradise, sealed away beyond a barrier no man can pass. Now you'd have me lead the Crew there—and what would they see? A barren plain, broken rock. And the dream would die, and them with it!"

"And if it's not a dream?"

"Look here, boy," the Captain's voice was softer, almost gentle. "I believed too, when I was young. It was a wonderful vision the old books gave us—a great civilization, a mighty war, a mission of great danger entrusted to our ancestors; a mission that one day we'd be called to carry out. It made me feel I was someone, that life had a meaning, a purpose." He paused to glare at Yonder under fierce white eyebrows. "Well, by the nine hells, life *does* have a meaning! Survival! We'll not abandon it to chase a myth to its death!"

"You're satisfied—with this?" Yondor moved his head to indicate the rude hut, the flimsy village outside.

"I accept reality."

"Do you?"

"What are you getting at?"

Yondor threw back his cape. There was a broad, half-healed scar across his upper arm. The old man's mouth tightened.

"Well?"

"I'd just cleared the pass. There was a sound—a strange sort of buzzing, like the sound of a fire beetle multiplied a thousand times. Then a sledge came into view from behind a spur of the mountain. I was caught out in the open."

"A sledge? None of our people were up that way—"

"There was a driver on the sledge; he was small—no bigger than a ten-winter child. His face was the color of a sow-fish."

"Are you trying to say—"

"The sledge was riding in the air, fifty feet above the treetops. He saw me, and turned my way; I tried to make it to the nearest cover, two hundred yards down-slope. That was when the shot hit me."

"Go on."

"I went down and lay still. He brought the sledge down to the ground and came over to make sure of me. I got my hands on him and choked him. He died easily."

The Captain shook himself like a man waking from a bad dream. "You're telling me that you saw this—this goblin—up close? That it attacked you?"

"The Log calls them Tewks," Yondor said.

"The Log!" The old man got to his feet, slammed his bench back. "The books have gone to your brain! These Tewks don't

exist—never existed! They're like the rest of the old tales—a symbol: evil personified. You don't need to look to little green imps for evil, boy! There's plenty of that in the hearts of men!"

"This symbol tried to kill me," Yondor said levelly.

Grannet looked at Yondor with an expression almost of pity. "You're a sick man," he said. "You've lost a lot of weight, and somewhere you've gotten a nasty burn. It's affected your mind"

YONDOR reached to his side, opened a flap on the hide receptacle stitched to his kilt. He took something out, held it out on his palm. It looked like a withered, greyish finger, with a polished talon. The old man's mouth opened.

"Wha—what is it?" His voice was a thin protest.

"The Tewk's hide was tough and my wound was painful. One finger was the best I could do."

The Captain reached out, picked up the grisly trophy, then turned suddenly, tossed it into the hot coals on the hearth. It smoked, burst into oily flame. A foul odor struck the men's nostrils.

"I don't know what you saw out there, Yondor," the old man said. "And I don't care. Whatever it is—Let it be."

"Burning the evidence doesn't

change anything," Yondor said flatly. "The Tewks are real. So is the Station. We have to find it."

"You'd destroy a way of life—because of a legend the old men tell the children over a campfire?"

"Our way of life isn't worth saving."

The old man looked at the young one. "I know I haven't been much of a father to you, boy—"

"You couldn't help it," Yondor said shortly. "You had your duties as Captain."

"Son—I'm appealing to you. Forget whatever you saw—whatever happened."

"No."

The old man's shoulders hunched angrily. He slapped the table. "I can't stop you from telling what you saw—or think you saw," he said. "Unless I kill you now—and I'm not willing to do that. And once the tale is out, there'll be fools and hotheads who'll want to go see for themselves. I'll strike a bargain with you. Don't spread your story abroad. I'll give you ten men and supplies. That's as far as I'll go."

Yondor nodded. "I'll accept that," he said. He went to the door, looked back at the old man, sitting staring after him.

"I'll need the talisman," he said.

"That's the Captain's badge of office," the old man said harshly.

"I'll still need it."

The old man nodded shortly. "You'll have it with you."

"Thanks—father," Yondor said.

"Go to the Devil," the Captain said.

IN THE grey of pre-dawn, Yondor waited as the party detailed to him assembled by the main watch-fire. The big figure of the Captain came up to him. "They're all here," he said shortly. "Might as well be off."

"There are only seven men," Yondor eyed his father, no taller than he, but outweighing him by thirty pounds of bear-like gristle and bone.

"You're overlooking the two women."

Yondor looked across at the group. "They're the wives of Lok and Hanno," he said. "I thought they were here to see their men off."

"The men won't go without them. I had to tell them a little. They have an idea they're going straight through to their mythical paradise."

"All right; they all know how to handle a bow. But that's still only nine."

"I'm the tenth."

"You?" Yondor studied the old man's face.

"I said the talisman would be with you. Where it goes, I go."

"Then you *do* believe—"

"A captain never surrenders

his trust—not till he's dead. The talisman's my trust."

YONDOR shook his head. "Not the talisman—what it represents."

"Call it what you like. Let's march."

"One other thing," Yondor said softly. "On this march—I give the orders."

"Certainly. Go ahead and give them."

Yondor nodded, signalled to the gathered crewmen, led the way out along the trail to the north.

2

Yondor stood at the foot of a mile-long sweep of boulder-strewn gravel that narrowed up to a cleft in the row of knife-edged peaks above, the captain at his side. Behind them, the straggling column of seven men and two women, their faces slack with the fatigue of ten days on the trail, emerged from dense forest, gaping up at the rampart before them.

"I wouldn't have believed it if I weren't seeing it with my own eyes," the old man said. "Thirty years ago the ice was two hundred feet thick at this point. Now it's almost like summer in the lowlands."

"The Tewks may have missed the one I killed," Yondor said.

"If so, we can expect a reception anytime now."

"Where's the sledge buried?"

"There." Yondor pointed. "In a pocket in the lee of the big rock."

The captain grunted. "Maybe he was just a lone scout—or a prospector."

"Maybe."

Yondor signalled; the column resumed the march. The men, bearded and grimy, and the women, with short-hacked hair, all clad alike in leather kilts and sandals, toiled upward, their eyes on the Pass ahead. All had bows; a few carried spears. Above the peaks, the sky was a deep, electric blue. Heavy clouds were gathering in the north.

"A heavy rain now could mean trouble," the old man said. "You should have waited until later in the spring."

"We've waited long enough."

The Captain's eyes scanned the peaks above. "We may be walking into a trap, you know."

"We've been in a trap for a hundred years and more," Yondor said. "We break out now—or not at all."

They were in the narrow passage between the towering rock-faces of the pass. The balmy spring air had turned cooler; distant lightning lashed down from blue-black clouds to etch the peaks at the far side of the walled

plain bright-edged against the black sky.

"That double peak—" Yondor pointed. "That's our first reference point mentioned in the Log —"

"You're guessing. The ice will have altered the topography from anything that might have existed here long ago."

"Not the high peaks. We'll follow this heading to its intersection with a line drawn from the highest peaks to the east and west."

"Then what?" The old man stared out across the rock-strewn plain. "There's nothing there, boy."

"The Log gives us instructions; I'll follow them."

THE Captain shook his white-ned head. "The talisman, eh? The magical oracle. I'll be sorry to see disillusionment hit you like this, all at once, but perhaps it's better that way than to see your hopes die slowly, for a lifetime—as mine did."

"Maybe they're not as dead as you think." Yondor started on, and the others followed.

Half a mile out onto the walled plain, Yondor halted the straggling column that trailed out behind him across the broken ground.

"This is the spot," he said, "as near as I can make it."

"Not much to it, is there, Yon-

dor?" The Captain looked around at shattered stone, heaped boulders, the drift left behind by melting ice. "You want to concede your error now?"

Yondor shook his head; he called to the Crew to gather around him. Then he turned to the old man.

"Give me the talisman, Captain," he said quietly.

The old man looked at him through narrowed eyes. "Don't be a fool," he answered softly. "You don't really expect miracles to happen?"

"I expect what the Log says would happen."

The Captain stepped closer to Yondor. "Listen, you young idiot!" he said in a low voice. "If they see your failure, there'll be Hell to pay! Go through a few mysterious motions and then tell them the spirits have spoken; that we're to go away and return in a hundred years; that they haven't yet made themselves worthy, that—"

"The talisman." Yondor held out his hand, waiting.

"I won't give up the symbol of my authority."

Yondor put a hand in the hide pouch at his waist, showed the curve of a polished shape of intricately worked metal. "That claw wasn't the only souvenir I picked up," he said in a low voice. "This is what the Tewk shot me with."

THE old man looked into Yondor's face. "Suppose I turn and walk away?"

"Then I'll kill you and take the talisman." Yondor's voice was steady.

"And destroy the discipline that holds us together as a Crew?"

"Whatever the consequences."

"I've had the box open," the Captain hissed. "I've never told anyone this before. There was nothing—nothing! I think it was that that finally made me realize—"

"Give it to me!" Yondor's voice had the crack of a whip.

The Captain's mouth was a hard line across his set face. He reached under his hide cloak, unslung a small flat grey metal case from his shoulder, silently handed it over. Yondor took it, held it high. The men and women of his crew stared up at it wonderingly.

"All of you have read the Log," Yondor called. "Or had it read aloud to you. It tells us that when we've come here—to the place where the Station of our grandfathers once stood—that the talisman would tell us what we must do—"

"There's nothing here, Yondor!" a man called, bewildered. "Where are the great huts of the ancients?"

"Captain!" another shouted. "What kind of place is this Yondor's led us to?"

Yondor cut through the rising clamor. "Listen! The talisman will speak to us now—" he caught the Captain's eye. "—or everything we've read in the Log is a lie, and our grandfathers liars."

There was a groan from the group, a mutter that died into silence. They watched as Yondor held the box before him, felt for the release catch, pressed it, then lifted the lid. The space inside contained a dull-finished black object as big as a man's hand, fitted into a spongy bed of white foam-material. Beside it were two rows of tiny cylinders, each with a number inscribed on its cap. The Crew members gaped, wide-eyed. Carefully, Yondor put the box on the rock at his feet, lifted out the black object, turned it over. There was a circular recess at one end. He selected the cylinder numbered 1 and thrust it into the hole. At once, an amber light glowed into vivid life above the aperture.

"A recorded message follows," a clear, tinny voice said. "May-day priority. . . ."

Yondor started, almost dropped the object in his hands. A soft hum was coming from it. Yondor felt sweat pop out on his forehead.

It's not alive, he told himself silently, urgently. This is the knowledge of the men who were our grandfathers. . . .

"I am Action Captain Wil-mott, commander of Watcher Station One," the thing in Yondor's hands said in a clear, oddly-accented voice. "The snow has continued for ninety-three days now; I am forced to order the evacuation of the Station. The contamination of the upper atmosphere with dust particles as a result of the destruction of the inner satellite has created abnormal weather conditions, planet-wide. . . ."

THE crew were surging back, eyes wide, mouths open. The Captain stood fast, an amazed look on his face. A murmur rose, grew louder.

"Quiet!" Yondor shouted. "This is only a machine—we were told of such things by the Log! There's nothing to fear!" He felt the sweat trickle down his face as he spoke.

". . . work our way southward, set up a temporary camp, and wait out the winter," the voice went on. "We don't know how long we may be denied access by the ice which is now thirty feet thick across the entire plain. Our heat-engines are inadequate to keep the Station clear. My meteorologists estimate the glaciation may last for a number of years. If this is the case, I cannot ignore the possibility that I may not be present when the Station is reopened. For that

reason, I am recording here complete instructions, for the use of the officer then commanding. It's of utmost importance that they be followed to the letter. . . ."

The nine Crew members had fallen back; the Captain stood where he was, his teeth bared in a rictus of shock.

". . . may collapse under the burden of ice," the voice was saying. "Fortunately, the major installations are constructed below the surface. Access to the technical installation may be gained by employing the recording cylinder marked 2. This will broadcast a twelve-digit code at a correct frequency to trigger the mechanism which will retract the protective cover from Entry Number One, leading to the main power installation, the Transporter Section. . . ."

Yondor plucked the cylinder from the socket. The voice cut off in mid-sentence, the light died.

"Keep them together!" he snapped. He knelt, replaced the cylinder in the box, picked out the one numbered 2, fitted it into the recess. The amber light winked on again. Immediately, from a point twenty feet away, near the base of an upthrust outcropping of rock, shrieks rang out. Heavy stones trembled; a rumble came from underground, a sound of tortured metal and rock. A long crack had appeared

across the littered ground; small stones and twigs dropped down into the black emptiness revealed. The crack widened, became a gaping hatch, beyond which grey metal was visible. The rumble changed tone. A massive shape rose up smoothly—as big as a hut in the encampment, marvelously smooth, covered with glittering eyes of red and white and pink. At its top, a cover opened, and a long rod extended itself. Other panels slid back, exposing squares of icy-smoothness, colored stones arrayed in rows. Beside the rod at the top, a round shape like a giant dish had appeared. As Yondor watched, it rotated, tilted up, fixed itself like an eye watching the sky. Now the base of the great metal shape was visible—a smooth column of polished metal, with an assembly of metal rods running up to a platform ringed with other bars of metal—more metal than Yondor had ever seen before. A long moan went up from the Crew as the great machine came to rest, towering above them. Shouting broke out then, cries of fear and curses and ancient prayers.

YONDOR faced the awed crowd.

"There's nothing to fear," he said, holding his voice steady. "This is a machine—a thing, built by men, to serve men. It belongs to us."

TIME BOMB

"This is a thing of the devils," a man shouted. "It came out of the ground, and it looks at us with its hundred eyes, and—" He broke off, choking, then pointed. The others were staring past Yondor; a woman screamed. People were going to their knees; others turned to run. Yondor whirled. A small window on the face of the machine was glowing with a cool green light. Against the light, a face appeared—a small, pinched face, the color of dead flesh. There were sharply pointed ears, wide, white eyes with pin-point pupils, a vertical slit of a nose, a V-shaped mouth. One of the crew man raised his spear; Yondor jumped to him, knocked him aside, wrenched the spear from him. "Stand back!" he snarled. "That's only an image—a picture!"

The Captain seized Yondor's arm. "Listen!" he grated.

"Humans, I greet you," a thin, crackly voice came from the screen. "It is well that you have signalled; now we will rescue you from your long imprisonment."

"Stand fast," Yondor called over his shoulder.

". . . We are your friends, humans," the thin voice went on. "Long ago, there was anger between our peoples, but that is long finished. Now we live in peace under the serene sun. It

may be that you harbor old memories of past enmity. Forget these things. Now all is love between us. Wait but a few short hours and we will come to you, with gifts of great richness. Until then, you must do nothing which . . . might be regretted."

The Captain gripped Yondor's arm. "Rescue!" he choked. "You—you hear what it says, Boy? It means—civilization! All the things we've read about, dreamed of! You were right!"

"My burn still aches," Yondor said grimly, freeing his arm. He walked forward, stood on the crest of the boulder before the great machine.

"How do we know you're not lying?" he called. The small greyish face twitched, turned away, seemed to speak to someone out of sight. Then it turned back. "I have sent for my friend, one of your own fellows, to assure you that we dwell together now in amity. I beg only that you wait, before carrying out any . . . ancient obligations."

The Tewk disappeared and the face of a man appeared on the screen, looking large and ruddy after the elfin look of the alien. Yondor noted the smoothly-trimmed hair, the shaven chin, the gleam of a ring on a finger as the man put up a hand to touch his cheek.

"Don't be frightened," a cool voice said. "It's as Puvetak has

said. The war is long since over. We live at peace. It's been many years since a group of refugees such as yourselves has turned up, but please be assured of your welcome. A ship will be dispatched at once. You will be brought here and given homes, or helped to improve your lot if you wish to remain where you are." He paused, settled his features in a stern look. "If by any chance you should be in possession of old battle orders, it is important that you disregard them. Since I enjoy the rank of Star Admiral in the Honorary Fleet, you may consider yourselves legally absolved from any further responsibility."

"You and the Tewks live together?" Yondor asked harshly. The Crew waited, silent, eyes on the screen. The man nodded. "We share this world, and others, in harmony. Strife has been eliminated from our lives. You will be welcomed among us as brothers in pacifism."

A BABBLE of talk broke out. Yondor turned to the Captain.

"Keep him talking," he said shortly as he started past him.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to listen to the message of the dead Action Captain. Then I'm going to carry out his orders."

"Wait, Boy!" the old man spun

him around. "We don't know what the mission of the Station was! It may be some hostile action!"

"That's right, it may," Yondor said grimly.

"You can't do it—not with rescue so near!"

"You believe the Tewk?"

"Why would he lie?"

"Why did one of them shoot at me?"

"I don't know—maybe it was a mistake—"

"It was." Yondor turned—and the Captain lunged, wrapped his grizzly arms around him, shouted to his crew. Two men closed in, seized Yondor's legs, tilted him off his feet. Eager hands plucked his knife from its sheath, the Tewk gun from the pouch. One man held a spear poised over his chest.

"Shall I . . . kill him?" Lok asked, looking frightened.

"Take him away—out of sight," the Captain ordered. "Get thongs, tie him up."

Yondor fought silently as three men hustled him down off the ridge of rock, dragged him around the base of the machine—an incongruously smooth pillar of bluish metal rising from the rubble. Two of them held him down against the broken stones while the third wrapped his ankles, then his wrists, in many turns of tough leather. Then they left him.

Yondor lay on his back, feeling the sharp pain of cuts and bruises, listening to the mutter of voices from above. The ancient machine towered over him, alien, terrifying. . . .

But men had made it, he reminded himself. Men like himself. It was a thing to know, not to fear. He studied its angular lines, saw how plates of metal had been joined to create its vast, flat surfaces. Up above, the paint was weathered, chipped, as though it had once been exposed for long periods to the weather. But the supporting shaft, fifteen feet in diameter, was as smooth as the surface of a still pond—except for a hair-line crack that ran up, then across, then down again. It was the size and shape, Yondor thought, of a doorway

HE groped with his fingers, found a razor-edged chip of shattered stone. Awkwardly, he worked it into position, sawed at the leather binding his wrists. The stone blade slipped from his grip, and he found another, started again. It was cold here in the shadow of the machine. Up above, the voices went on. Yondor worked patiently, watching the sky darken. Rain began, pattering down in large, wind-driven drops that struck like pebbles.

His wrists were slippery with blood now, and his fingers too; the stone chip was hard to hold.

It was a long time before the first strand of leather parted; the sodden rawhide clung, stiff and binding. He renewed his efforts. His arms ached; he had been working at the bindings for nearly two hours now, he estimated. A second strand fell loose, and a few minutes later, another. Yondor sat up, shook the remaining loops free, then worked his fingers to warm them, started in on the straps securing his ankles.

Yondor caught a hint of motion from the corner of his eye, looked up, past the bulk of the machine. Out of the thunderhead to the east, a silent black shape appeared, sweeping toward him with fantastic speed, swelling to the shape of a great dart; it was like the sledge that Yondor had covered with rock two weeks earlier, but larger. It rolled, light flashing from silver-black wings—and then the sound struck, like a scream of rage, shrieking after the dart-shape as it climbed up, up, over, swinging in a wide arc, visibly slowing now. Yondor heard shouts from above, the commanding roar of the Captain. The dart was floating in toward the machine, looking feather-light as it settled toward the shattered ground. It passed from view on the opposite side of the machine, and Yondor heard a

soft scraping as it came to ground. With a last frantic slash, he freed his ankles, then rose, unsteady on his feet from the tightness of the thongs, made his way to a jumble of rocks from which he could observe unseen.

Through a veil of falling rain, Yondor saw a bubble of what looked like ice rise up atop the flying machine. Four small creatures with pale, dead faces and staring eyes, dressed in tight black garments, stepped from a hollow inside, jumped down to the rocky ground, came splashing forward. They carried shiny objects in their hands. Fifty feet from where the Captain stood, waiting, they halted.

"You are the leader of the humans?" one of the Tewks asked in a twittery voice, barely audible over the drumming of the rain.

"I am captain," the white head nodded, waiting.

"Tell all of the humans to lie down," the Tewk said. "They will put their hands above their heads, flat on the ground."

THE old man faced them. He turned slowly, called out hoarsely: "Do as our friends say."

The men and women of the Crew, standing huddled together, stared at their captain. Yondor could see the doubt and fear in their faces.

"Why—?" one started. A Tewk whirled to face him. The man fell silent. For a long moment no one moved. Then one of the Crewmen went down to his knees, lay on his face, his hands outstretched. A woman followed suit, then the others. Only the Captain stood now, still facing the aliens. They twittered among themselves. One came forward, absurdly tiny beside the towering man.

"Give me the box you wear slung at your side," he twittered. It was the talisman, Yondor saw; the Captain had recovered his badge of office. Now he reached, lifted the strap from his shoulder, handed it across docilely. The Tewk took it, went back to his fellows, offered it to one whose black garment bore a red dot on the abdomen. More twittering ensued. The men and women lay silently on the wet ground. The captain stood where he was, as though waiting.

Yondor eased back from his position, looked down at the shallow slope toward the outline of a door in the side of the machine's base. He rose, concealed from the Tewks by the ridge, went down to it, put his hands against the cold, smooth metal. There was a small depression to the right side of the panel, shaped to fit a finger. Yondor pressed it; nothing happened. Up above, the twittering of the

aliens was a faint sound like wind among eroded stones. Yondor felt farther over the glass-hard surface, found a second tiny indentation. He pressed both together. With a soft sigh of oiled gears, the panel stirred, slid back. Yondor looked into a dark cave with polished, curving walls, caught an odor of dust and mould. A soft light sprang up as the door seated open, and Yondor stared at strange shapes of intricate metal and shining fixtures finished in that miraculous smoothness that marked the work of the men of long ago. He hesitated, then pressed the sensitive points again, and the entry narrowed, shut. Yondor made his way silently back to the base of the ridge.

THE Tewk with the red dot was still holding the talisman, turning it over in his thin-fingered hands, as the others stood by, watching. The rain seemed to bounce away from their black garments before it touched them. The crew lay where Yondor had last seen them, like sodden corpses. The Captain stood dumbly by, not even watching the Tewks. Yondor could see the water streaming down his face, across his open, unblinking eyes.

Now the leader of the Tewks spoke to his three followers. One went back to the small flying sledge, clambered inside. The

other two went up the ridge of rock, out of sight. Yondor heard the clack of their feet on the narrow platform that circled above his head. The red-dotted Tewk stood alone now, still poring over the flat grey box with its dangling leather strap. Yondor glanced over the detritus at his feet, selected a dagger-shaped chip of volcanic rock the size of his hand. It was only twenty feet to where the lone alien stood, directly up the rise of broken stone and across the flat at its top. But if he circled along the base of the abutment. . . .

Two minutes later, Yondor raised his head cautiously, saw the alien standing at the same spot, no more than ten feet distant, his narrow back turned. Yondor gripped the sharp stone, rose silently, leaped up the slope of loose rock. In two steps he was behind the small creature, and as it turned in tardy alarm, he locked an arm about the narrow chest, brought the stone blade up and struck down deep into gristle, then dropped the knife and snatched the talisman from the stiffened hand as the Tewk fell. He whirled, seeing the alien seated in the dart-ship rise, point something that glittered—

Fire gouged a smoking furrow in the rock as Yondor leaped, struck the slopes, skidded down, rolling, came to his feet hearing a frantic twitter from above. He

sprinted, reached the curving wall of the machine's supporting column, ran his hands over the cold metal. His fingers found one depression, almost invisible in the gloom and the runnels of rain. A vivid light glared behind him; molten rock spurted at his feet, hissing in molecular fury at the touch of the rain. Yondor found the second point, pressed, then stooped, caught up a stone, hurled it at the source of the glare, heard a thump; the light went out. His teeth bared in a ferocious grin, Yondor leaped for the open entry, whirled to feel for the closing switches. A beam of blue-white light lanced through the closing panel, burned the color from a strip of floor, revealing mirror-bright metal beneath. Then the door narrowed, shut, and abruptly Yondor was alone in total silence.

Yondor looked around the room in which he stood. It was smooth-walled, flat-floored, impossibly precise in all its curves and angles. Heavy shapes of incomprehensible function were set against the grey-painted walls, crouched in the center of the polished floor. Only the black-edged scar of the Tewk's weapon marred the immaculate precision of the chamber.

For a moment, Yondor fought panic, a sense of being trapped in a place of infinite, unknow-

able peril. Then he drew a deep breath, went to the nearest machine. There were lines of lettering on it, he saw—letters like those in the old books preserved in the Captain's hut. It had been a long time since he had deciphered letters; he squinted, made out a few familiar words among the numbers: *Comply Tech Ord. 564-9-331*, he puzzled out, and *Secure Code 39 Prior Activation*.

THESE were words of power, known to the men of old; to him they meant nothing. He prowled the room, found a small railed stairway leading down. There was a white rectangle attached to the railing, with large letters on it: CHECK DOME PRESSURE BEFORE SEALING. He went on, completed his circuit of the room. There was no indication of immediate danger—or of help. He squatted on the floor, opened the grey box called the talisman, inserted a cylinder in the voice machine.

"... primary power installation," the dry voice resumed, where he had interrupted it hours before. "Level three is reached via the pressure hatch at the east end of the station. Weapons control is situated here, and the Controller's master panel can be reached. . . ." Yondor listened as the voice droned on, not understanding.

"No," he said aloud to the thing in his hands. "Don't talk of these matters. Tell me how to kill the Tewks!"

The voice went on, unheeding. Yondor spoke again and again to the dead Action Captain, pleading, demanding. The voice continued, ignoring him.

"... contact with Base Primary," it was saying. "Only in this instance will the reserve energy pile be activated. A failure in the central generator well will, of course, switch in secondary power automatically—"

THE voice died in mid-sentence. Yondor waited, eager. Perhaps the dead captain would answer his questions now. . . .

The silence went on. Then, without warning, the light in the room died. Yondor crouched, staring into the absolute blackness. He felt for the cylinder, withdrew it, tried another without result. The voice was dead. He dropped the talisman, went quickly to the door. His fingers found the recesses, pressed them. There was no response. He threw his weight against the door. It was as unyielding as the wall beside it.

He backed away, every sense alert. His hand encountered the rail guarding the stair. He felt his way to the top step, went down, driven by the instinct of the hunted animal to go to earth.

Down below, his feet echoed in darkness. He could tell by the sound that this was a larger room. The air here was stale with an odor of musty age. Yondor stood, tense, head cocked, listening. The stillness was absolute. He remembered the flint and steel in his pouch then, got it out, struck a spark. By its brief flash he saw paper scattered on the floor, odds and ends of clothing. He wished there were tinder here, something with which to make a fire. Perhaps the paper. . . . He squatted, crumbled a piece into dry flakes, struck a spark against it; it glowed, and he breathed on it until it broke into flame. Quickly he fed it, but the fuel burned away almost as fast as he gathered it. As the blaze died, he looked around, saw panels like those above, set with chips of the colored ice, the dark opening of a hall leading off to the left, a closed door at the far end of the room. The last glow winked out and he rose, went to the door; it opened at a touch. Yondor pushed past it into dim light, and stopped dead, staring at a tiny cubicle against one wall, from which the light came. He went to it, opened the door which stood ajar.

Inside it was a large dial, a row of buttons like dull black stones, a projecting lever with a hand-grip above a seat shaped

to embrace a human body. There were handrests, and foot-shaped hollows for the feet, a support for the head. He stepped inside; the door folded shut and a soft light went on on the wall above. Gingerly, he seated himself; the seat seemed to change shape to accommodate him. He leaped up, then cautiously sat down again. This time nothing happened. The seat was very comfortable. There was a placard before his face:

WARNING: TRANSPORTER WILL BE USED ONLY ON COMMAND OF OFFICER IN CHARGE.

Below, in smaller letters, Yondor spelled out: **IMPORTANT! Code destination BEFORE unlatching activator switch.**

Yondor puzzled over the words. A Transporter could mean a machine for moving about. If he used it, perhaps he would emerge outside again by a hidden route. Then, coming upon them by surprise, he could kill another of the aliens, and with his gun, the others. . . .

He examined the black buttons, pushed a few of them at random, but nothing happened. Gingerly he gripped the lever, tried to move it sideways, then up; he pulled down on it, and suddenly it moved—

There was a sharp smack! as though giant hands had clapped. Dust appeared, settling in the

air. Yondor felt a sensation of dizziness. He stood, pushed at the door. It folded back—

He was on a platform of stone as level as sheet-ice under the glare of open sky.

4

A hot wind blew choking dust into his face. Beyond the flat, semi-circular area where he stood, a trail ran flat and straight between cliffs of an unnatural verticality that rose up, up—hundreds of yards—to disappear in the ochre murk above. There was a large, ragged hole in the cliff opposite, and below it, in the center of the trail, a mound of broken stone. It was a strange country—stranger than anything Yondor had ever dreamed of. The transporter had carried him far from home—he knew it instinctively. But where?

HE stepped out into the center of the trail, looked along it. As far as the eye could see, the vertical walls towered on either side. He noticed a rectangular recess set into the rock face nearby; there was carving above it, dim through the cloud of dust that blew along the canyon. He went across, peered up at it, made out letters: PUBLIC LIBRARY.

The shock of understanding

staggered him. These were huts! Man-made cliffs, artificial caves! He had read of such things in the old books, but the actuality was so much vaster than anything he had imagined. He was in a . . . *a city*, the unused word came to his mind, a city built by men.

Yondor opened his mouth to shout, then checked himself. Surely, all men were allies—but better to make sure. . . .

He walked along the street, clambering over the occasional heaps of rubble—stones fallen from the building above, he guessed. The irregular gaps in the measured façades were a disturbing note. Those, and the silence. Where were the men who had built this place?

THERE was a faint sound from ahead, and Yondor ducked back, sheltering behind a projecting buttress that flanked a vast sheet of the strange warm ice, beyond which incomprehensible objects in bright colors were heaped.

He listened, heard the scrape of feet, the sound of ragged breathing, a hacking cough. Moving carefully, he risked a glance, saw three scarecrow figures moving uncertainly along in the center of the wide avenue. One was an old man, with a wispy beard. The second was a woman with a gaunt, hollow

face, arms like dry branches. A second man followed, leaning on a stick, pausing every few steps to cough. Each dragged a sack that bumped along in the dust with the weight of what it contained. They had come from one of the doors cut in the cliff, Yondor saw. They were only three, and they were weak and sick. He stepped out into view, held out his empty hands to show that his intentions were peaceful.

"Hello!" he called. His voice boomed back from the walls, rang along the dusty street. The three stopped dead, their eyes like black holes burned in a deerhide. Then they whirled, darted off, each in a different direction, and were gone. Yondor ran a few steps after them.

"I'm a friend!" he called. "I need your help!" His words re-echoed, "help . . . help. . ."

He called again and again, searched along the cliff-face for their hiding places. It was as though they had never been, except for the three forlorn sacks abandoned on the pavement. Yondor came back to them, opened one, dumped out a half a dozen smooth, heavy cylinders, of different sizes, each with an incomprehensible picture printed in color around its curved side. He puzzled over the lettering on one: *Figs in Heavy Syrup*. Another said *Boned Grist-fowl—Extra Fancy*.

He dropped the objects and went back along the street to the transporter, its closed door almost invisible against the smooth stone of the recess in the great hut wall. His lungs burned from the blowing dust, his eyes smarted. He could feel the grit between his teeth. There was nothing here for him—no help against the Tewks. Yondor forced the resisting door wide, stepped inside the narrow booth, seated himself in the chair. The machine had brought him here; now it would take him back, and he could find another way from the trap. He gripped the familiar lever, pressed it down.

There was an instant of shock—of time suspended, then a violent wrench, and a red light flashing before his face. This was different from the last time! Yondor felt his heart thud in his chest. Scarlet letters glared before his face: **DESTINATION EMERGENCY INOPERATIVE** There were other words below, but Yondor felt too shaken to attempt to read them. He thrust the door wide; it was as he feared: the street of yellow dust. He slammed the door against the choking cloud, sat calming himself with an effort. Then he punched at the black buttons in the silver frame; the red lights went off. Now! He tried the lever again. There was the sensation of a soundless blow, a flicker of

the white dome light, then stillness. Yondor pushed the door wide—and looked out into a vast, dark cave. Far above, dim greenish lights glowed in the immense vault of a high roof. The floor stretched, flat as a still lake, reflecting the lights above. Far away, small noises sounded: meaningless hisses, clatters, metallic sounds, the murmur of strange winds and things that stirred underground. Yondor could feel his face, set in a grimace of fear—the animal's instinctive baring of fighting fangs.

But what was there to fear? This was another place built by men, civilized men. He was a man, too; he understood such things; he had read the books.

YONDOR stepped out from the transporter, crossed the wide floor, followed the curve of a wall as smooth as polished metal. It swung away to the left, an echoing tunnel, dim and dusty. Was this place like the last—a ruin where only a few sick men prowled? But the sounds were those of many men. They seemed to come from above. . . .

Ahead, a wall of rough masonry barred the way. Yondor turned back, explored a branching side-passage. It, too, ended in a wall of course-laid stone that contrasted with the smooth walls of the wide tunnel. He retraced his steps, passed the

transporter, dim-glowing in the gloom, went on. Fifty yards along the way a wall loomed. Yondor went up to it, saw how the massive rocks were set in black mortar as hard as stone. To one side, a pair of metal rods ran up, with cross-bars between them. A man could climb that

He went up, found a heavy disc of metal set in the ceiling above. He braced himself, lifted it—and light poured in. He pulled himself up onto a smooth floor, stood. The sounds were louder here—sounds of life, movement—and other sounds that he knew were made by machines. Men used many machines, he was learning; perhaps he would learn in time not to stiffen with caution each time he saw one.

THERE was brighter light ahead, and he could hear a curious, bird-like twittering. He went along the hall, came out through a high arch—and halted, his hand going instinctively for the knife that was no longer there. The room he had come into was crowded with the tiny, quick-moving creatures called Tewks.

5

Yondor drew back a step, feeling the low rumble in his throat that a confrontation with dan-

gerous game called forth, unbidden. One of the grey-faced manikins was looking at him—staring blankly with the wide, lidless eyes of his kind. Others were turning now; their chirping was changing tone; a crowd was beginning to form, watching him, pointing. Yondor retreated a step, gauging the distance he would have to leap to gain the shelter of the archway. The Tewk who had first seen him came a step toward him, its sandalled feet clicking with its mincing steps. It spoke to him in its shrill language, demanding.

A taller figure was moving through the press, and for a moment Yondor failed to recognize him as a Man. He was strangely pale, and his hair was shorn close, trimmed smooth, and he was draped in a silvery fabric like those the Tewks wore, that shimmered as he walked. The man came up beside the Tewk, looked Yondor up and down while the Tewk chattered at him.

"Who are you?" the man said. The words were distorted, but understandable.

Yondor forced his voice to sound. "My name is Yondor," he said between his teeth. "I came from World—in the machine men built long ago."

"What world?" The smooth forehead wrinkled. "Pewtikup says that you emerged from . . .

there." He indicated the arch with a wave of a ringed finger.

"Yes. In the" He groped for the word. "The transporter."

The man turned to the Tewk, twittered at him. The Tewk replied, its great eyes never leaving Yondor's face. A second man appeared, looming above the small aliens, made his way to the fore. He was older, to judge from the fine wrinkles about his eyes, the silvery grey of his hair. He chirped, listened to answering chirps, then smiled a wintry smile.

"How long have you hidden in the unused passages?" he demanded suddenly.

Yondor ignored the meaningless question, watching the gathering Tewks. The newcomer frowned; the Tewks made their whistling sounds; the man pursed his lips.

"They tell me you spoke of a transporter."

Yondor's eyes scanned the crowd. There were other men in sight, head and shoulders above the hurrying Tewks. He counted ten, twenty moving about their business. . . .

"These creatures aren't armed," he said tensely to the man before him. "They die easily. If we attack them suddenly, and call to the other men to rally to us, we can gain control of this chamber—"

THE man was staring at him, his mouth open. He turned to the Tewk at his side, twittered at him, pointing at Yondor. The Tewks listened; then a stir began among them. Yondor saw black-clad aliens coming toward him through the press, as though summoned by an inaudible signal.

"Those in black—they carry weapons?" he demanded of the nearest man.

"You won't be harmed," the man said soothingly. "Just wait quietly, now—"

Yondor backed away. The Tewks approached, whistling.

"Wait!" the other man called. "Where did you come from? Why are you here?"

"The machine that men built brought me here. I came for help, but I see they've enslaved you too—"

"Slaves? We live as equals—"

A black-uniformed Tewk came boldly forward; with a blow, Yondor knocked the alien sprawling; he turned and ran, and shouts and twittering followed him.

The first Tewk dropped through the manhole as Yondor reached the transporter. He slammed the door, punched buttons, hauled down the lever. The red warning sign flashed. He punched again, and still the crimson letters glared. A third time; the letters faded. Yondor

put a hand on the lever, and with a crash, the door flew wide. He stood, smashed his fist into the pinched grey face of a Tewk, slammed the door, reached for the lever—and again the door crashed open. Yondor half-rose, looking into the narrow features, as alien as a fire-bug. . . .

Time seemed to slow, grind to a halt. Two great pale eyes swam before him. A shrilling sounded in his head, a sound sweeter, it seemed, than anything he had ever heard before. He felt himself floating in the air, surrounded by warmth, soothing caresses, infinite ease. . . .

Pain penetrated the euphoria. Yondor gasped, shook his head. He was leaning against the wall, and a sharp corner of the folded door was gouging into the half-healed burn across his arm. He shook his head, pulled himself upright. There had been something—something that had seemed utterly desirable, beautiful beyond description. . . .

There was movement before him; he blinked, made out the shape of the small alien turning away to twitter to the tall man beside it.

". . . strange savage creature," a man was saying to another. "Did he actually come here in this apparatus?"

"The hideous danger of it," a thin human voice said. "Even if it functioned, to be propelled out

there—to some unknown, desolated place. . . .”

Yondor gathered himself, reached, slammed shut the door, caught at the lever and threw it down.

6

Again there was the surge of dizziness, the sense of silent explosion, the stir of whirling dust jarred from ancient crevices by some unseen force . . . then stillness. Yondor got to his feet, the strange lassitude still dragging at his arms and legs, the memory of a glimpse of paradise still ringing in his mind. The door folded back, and he stepped out into a high-vaulted corridor with tall windows through which slanting sunlight struck on rich walls of carved gold, heavy hangings of deep-colored fabric, long cases with glass covers under which bright objects lay in long arrays.

HE went to one, looked down at flat discs of bright yellow metal, intricately engraved. The next case contained tiny statuettes of the same yellow metal, and a display of daggers with elaborate handles and blades as bright as the first glint of the morning sun. He needed a weapon. Yondor doubled his fist, slammed it down against the thin layer of glass. It rebounded.

He rubbed his bruised hand; the material of the Old Men was stronger than it looked.

He followed the wide hall, found a grand staircase leading down to a vast room with a wall of glass that gave a view of a flat expanse of green, a row of tall trees, and beyond, the high towers of great huts like those in the city of yellow dust.

A sound echoed through the sunny cavern; Yondor whirled. Standing at a small door in a blank wall of gold-worked black was a small, round-shouldered man wearing a short kilt joined between his skinny thighs and a fitted cape over his bony shoulders and arms. His hair was thin and white, his face wrinkled. He was staring across at Yondor.

“The museum’s not open,” he said in a reedy voice. “How did you get inside?”

The accent was strange but understandable. Yondor looked around for Tewks, but there was no one but the old man.

“No one’s allowed inside before second sun,” the man said. “You’ll have to wait outside.”

“I came here in the transporter of the Old Men,” Yondor said, hearing his voice echo. He wanted to say more—to explain that he was lost, to ask for help—but the words seemed to catch in his throat. All men were not natural allies; he had learned that much.

He would wait, and be ready to kill the old man and escape if necessary.

THE old man shuffled across to him. "Transporter of old men?" he cackled. "Well, lad, I'd be more likely a passenger for such a line than you. What did I do, then? Leave the door unlocked again?"

"I came from there. . . ." Yondor pointed to the wide gallery above. The oldster was close now, peering through a thing of wires perched on his face. He frowned.

"You're strangely dressed—like a wild man. Animal hides. . . ."

"The Tewks came in a flying sledge," Yondor said. "They want to make us their slaves. I was trapped in the machine of the Old Men, and then I found my way here. I need fighting men to help me, and weapons—"

"Tewks? Fighting?" The caretaker stepped back. "You have a strange manner of speech. Who are you? I don't understand all this talk of old men. How did you get in the museum?"

"As I said, old man! I came in the machine called a transporter!"

The man backed away in alarm; his fingers went to a small metal box attached to his belt. Far away Yondor heard a soft sound that wailed on and on,

then cut off. Running feet sounded, coming closer. Yondor looked around for an escape route, started for the staircase as two men burst into the big hall through a door he hadn't seen.

Yondor halted, his route cut off. The newcomers skidded to a halt, their eyes flickering over him. One raised a rod, a foot long and an inch in diameter.

"A crazy man," the old curator said hurriedly. "I found him inside when I opened up—"

"All right, fellow," the man with the rod said. He came up to Yondor. "No violence now."

Yondor measured the distance to the stairs with his eyes. He could knock this man aside, run for it—

"Don't try to escape, you fool—"

Yondor leaped, smashed a side-handed blow at the man, saw him reel aside—

THEN white hot fire poured over his back, and he gasped in agony, stumbled, fell. His eyes blurred with pain tears, he got to hands and knees, tried to stand.

"Look at him! He took a 5 agon charge at ten feet, and he's still coming up for more!"

"Don't!" Yondor heard the old man shout. "I don't think he means harm! He's frightened."

Yondor got to his feet. The pain was miraculously gone,

washed away like trail dust in a flowing stream. He looked at the rod in the hand of the man he had struck.

"That's right," the man held the weapon aimed. "Want more, or will you come quietly?"

Yondor drew a shaky breath. "Give me weapons like that to fight the Tewks," he said between his teeth.

The old man came cautiously up to him. "Who are you? How did you get inside the museum?"

"I told you, old man," Yondor pointed. "In the machine."

The watery eyes behind their glasses turned up toward the gallery. "You're saying—you used the old military personnel transmitter? You must be out of your mind! It's not operable, hasn't been used for a century or more."

"Still, it brought me here. What place is this?"

"Eh? Why, you're in the city of Gorrane, on the world Lotispa. But—" he broke off. "Show me the machine you say you used." He looked at the guards. "I must look into this."

With the two policemen at his side, Yondor led the aged curator up the wide stairs, along to the transporter booth, standing ranked beside curious wheeled carts, apparatuses of rods and folded wings, hollowed-out shells with seats fitted inside them. He pointed.

"I came in that," he said.

The oldster went to the transporter, gingerly pushed back the door, peered inside.

"Draws its power from a sealed high-demand pack," he muttered. "Autotuned to the system; special emergency override circuitry. . . ." He looked at Yondor.

"You're telling me the truth? You used this?"

"Yes."

The curator turned to the policemen. "You have a wheel-car?"

"Yes—but you don't believe that story?"

"I don't know. . . ." The old man looked at Yondor, studying his face, his hide garments, his scarred hands.

"But if it is true—then this is a matter for the highest authorities to see to."

7

The two armed men stood silently by as Yondor waited with the old man in a vast, deep-carpeted room set out with polished furniture of flame-red wood, hung with framed pictures, walled with mute-toned pastels. From somewhere, sounds came, wonderfully soft and soothing—but Yondor felt far from soothed. It had been a strange ride—cooped up in a cage that moved along the trail as silent as water flowing in a wide stream, with

the man-made cliffs looming overhead and strange, palefaced men in bright-colored skins crowded in the smaller trails beside the wide one. Now he was deep inside a cave filled with unfamiliar sounds and smells and textures and men who stared, gabbling questions as he passed. His eyes went round and round the room, instinctively searching for an escape route; his hands worked, wishing for a knife or a spear or bow.

"Now, just take it gently, lad," the oldster said. "There's no danger here. The magistrates will talk to you, that's all. Then I'll see that you get a good meal and suitable clothes—"

"I don't need food or clothes," Yondor said. "I need the help of men against the enemies of men."

THE old man clucked. "Men have no enemies, my boy. But perhaps something can be done to aid your . . . your tribe—if there is such a thing."

"We aren't a tribe," Yondor said shortly. "We're a crew, led by the Captain. We're men like you. . . ."

"Your . . . crew . . . must be the descendants of a unit stationed on some outpost world during the hostilities," the curator said. "Somehow left behind and forgotten when the peace was signed—"

"There is no peace," Yondor said shortly.

"You must have misunderstood what you saw—"

"I saw my captain hand over his talisman of office without a word," Yondor said harshly. "I saw him stand like a stone when the dead-faced ones ordered his crew into the mud like slaves—"

"But of course simple people would be amazed by the sudden appearance of a flying machine, and the sight of an alien species," the old man said. "It's only natural they'd be struck dumb, so to speak—"

"I saw another place, where men live like animals in the dust," Yondor said. "And another where men are pampered slaves, speaking the language of their enemies—"

THE door opened, and a woman with smooth gold hair and cheeks like the petals of a new-bloomed water-rose appeared, looked curiously at Yondor, nodded to the old man. Yondor followed him past the girl, who stepped back, staring. He came into a room like the one where he had waited, but larger, with wide windows and a great block of polished wood around which sat five soft-faced men, all of them with silvery hair or bald scalps, sagging, doughy jowls, pale, beardless jaws, sharp eyes.

"This is the person, excellen-

cies," the curator said. "He states that he came here via the old military transporter system, and—"

"Let him tell his own story," the man at the center of the table said. "Who are you, young fellow? Better tell us the truth now, or it will go hard with you."

"As this old man told you," Yondor said, "I came in the machine. I want weapons to fight the Tewks, and men—"

"The fellow stinks," someone said. "Those damned hides he's draped in—they smell like a dog's den."

"He's been in an accident," another said. "He's cut to pieces—"

"Quiet!" snapped the man who had first spoken. "Never mind his smell. Let's hear what he has to say." He glared at Yondor. "And no lies, mind you!"

Nearly an hour later, Yondor still stood, listening now while the five men talked. He felt his knees tremble with fatigue; his stomach ached with hunger. These men were not friends, he knew that now. It had been a mistake to come here. He should never have let the old man lead him into this vast pile of huts, heaped one atop another—

One of the men was looking at him, clearing his throat.

"You—Yondor, I think you said you call yourself," the man

said. "I've checked on a portion of your story; it appears that a power surge was registered on the instruments at Central Energy Control at the time you state you arrived here. For the present, I am willing to accept your account, and release you from custody, provided a sponsor can be found to vouch for you." He shot a look at the curator.

"I'll be glad to see to the young man," the curator said quickly. He was sitting perched on the edge of a green leather chair by the wall.

"You'll help us then?" Yondor heard his own voice sounding as though it were echoing in a cave.

"Your . . . ah . . . people are in no danger," the magistrate said shortly. "We are at peace. The Tewks keep to their worlds and we keep to ours—"

"I told you how they came among us," Yondor said. "One look from their great eyes, and the soul of a man goes out of him—"

DON'T be impertinent! I can excuse only so much on the grounds of ignorance! I've told you we're at peace! And if man and Tewk co-exist on a few worlds, that's nothing to take alarm at."

"Give me weapons, then! We'll fight them alone—!"

"Weapons are illegal! I don't know where this place you come

from is, but whatever habits of savagery you formed there will have to be forgotten now. You're among civilized men, and you'll conduct yourself accordingly, or be confined in a corrective institution!" The magistrate shot a sharp look at the old man. "Take him along with you now, Curator—see to it that he remains orderly."

"I'll go back to my own place," Yondor said. "I don't need a keeper—"

"There's no chance of that, for which you should be grateful," the magistrate said. "Here, you'll be assigned quarters, and supplied with the necessities of life. No man goes hungry or in need in our modern society. But forget ideas of returning. That is impossible."

"What do you mean?" Yondor fought back the sudden, suffocating sense of entrapment.

"Even if you were to be allowed to make use of the old military system—which you will not, of course, since it's tantamount to suicide and a damnable waste of power as well—there is no way for you to reach your destination, unless you know its code, which you've admitted you don't. Therefore—"

"I have to go back!" Yondor's head was spinning now; he put his hands on the edge of the table, held himself upright.

"There are eighteen hundred

of us—free men and women. Without weapons we're helpless against the Tewks!"

"The Tewks are our allies and good friends!" the magistrate roared. "That is a lesson you'd best learn at once!"

"Please, your excellencies." The old curator had risen and come to Yondor's side. "The poor lad doesn't know what he's saying. He's not well—see the pallor of his face. I should have seen to his injuries before I brought him here, but in the excitement—let me take him now. I'll see to it that he causes no trouble."

YONDOR only half-heard the mutter and bark of voices; he followed as a hand tugged at his arm. Blackness was closing in, and he tried to steady himself, not to show weakness in the presence of his enemies, but the dark was all around, shot through with light, and then the lights went out and he fell as from a great height.

8

He awoke with the face of the old man bending over him, frowning worriedly, and an odor of hot food sharp in his nostrils. His eyes darted around to take in a small room, neatly but not elaborately furnished, with one small window through which blue sky showed.

"Ah, there you are!" the old man smiled, nodding. "You've slept for sixteen hours, and I'd begun to worry. . . ." He indicated a tray with a bowl of steaming soup, flat slices of bread, fruit, a small container of a pungent sauce. Yondor ate silently, feeling the dizziness diminish with each mouthful.

"You're near starved, it seems, boy. You're thin, and under that tan your color's bad."

"Life isn't easy on World," Yondor said. "Thank you for the food, old man." He stood. "Now I have to go back. Will you take me to the machine?"

"Eh? Why, you heard the magistrate! It's impossible! And in any case, you're far better off here—"

"I have to go back!" Yondor started across the room, caught movement from the corner of his eye, whirled, and was staring into a tall mirror. For a moment he failed to recognize his own reflection. He was clean-shaven, dressed in the smooth cloth of the Old Men. His hair had been trimmed, and his skin scrubbed to a pale shade he had never seen before.

"Just accept it; you've left the old life behind you," the old man was saying. "Your friends will be helped by the Tewks to improve their lot in time—"

"The Tewks make slaves of men. I have to fight them!"

"I promised the magistrates you'd make no trouble," the old man said. "I'm responsible for you—"

"Take me back to the great hut where I first saw you."

"Back to the museum? But this is Rest Day; the museum's closed—"

"Then I'll find it myself." Yondor reached for the door latch—

"No, no; you can't wander about alone! I'll take you—but you must promise me you'll cause no disturbance!"

"I'll cause no disturbance."

"Come along then; but you're wasting your hopes on a vain errand, lad. Your World is just one of thousands on thousands of abandoned worlds where men once built their out-stations. It's lost to you forever. Accept that!" He led the way out into a featureless corridor.

"Why were they abandoned?"

"The war ended; what need was there for military out-posts?"

"World is a good place; men can live there. With the machines of the Old Men, we could make it all into rich farms and grazing lands, and build fine huts for everyone—"

"There are houses enough for all, here on Lotispa. We need no new worlds."

"And when the Tewks come here—what then?"

THE old man laughed gently, motioning Yondor into the frighteningly close confines of a tiny chamber that he knew would fall sickeningly, before slowing to a safe stop. He gritted his teeth, as the door hissed shut and the elevator dropped.

Inside the echoing grand foyer of the museum, the old man pointed out the branching passages in which Yondor could see rows of cases, wall displays, free-standing exhibits ranging into misty distance.

"Let me show you the hall of music," he suggested. "Or the gallery of the visual arts, or the Story of Drama exhibit—"

Yondor went toward the stair leading up to the gallery where the transportation display was set up. The old man darted after him. "Yondor! Don't be a stubborn fool! I've told you—we've all told you—you can't use the machine—and if you did, you'd have no way of knowing where you'd end!"

"They spoke of a code," Yondor said, starting up the wide stairs. "With your help, I could find the code of World."

"Impossible! There are thousands upon thousands of possible combinations—"

"We can try."

The old man was trotting at Yondor's side now. "There is a catalogue," he said. "But the in-

dexing is by Standard Reference Designation—"

"I can read," Yondor said. "I'll find World, and the book will show the code—"

"World is your own name for your planet," the old man said. "It isn't listed by that designation." They had reached the gallery now. The old man pointed to a panel set with buttons and dials. "The SRD index," he said. "At one time over one hundred thousand Termini were listed; only a few hundred were still active when the system was closed, many years ago—"

"Why was it closed?"

"It was no longer needed."

"Why?"

"Because—because . . . the old man spread his hands. "The war was finished—"

"Why were only a few hundred stations active at the end?"

"Eh? Well, as to that, I assume it was because the worlds they linked were no longer in use."

"Then men were driven back from their worlds—by the Tewks?"

"Nothing of the sort! It was all done by treaty, freely entered into—"

Yondor nodded. "I've seen their methods of persuasion," he said. "They have the power to cast a spell over men's minds—"

"Now, now, surely you don't believe in that sort of thing."

"When they met the fleets of the old men in battle, they lost—but when they talked of peace, face to face, they won. Call it what you like, old man!"

FROWNING, the curator motioned to Yondor, led the way into a room forty feet on a side with a domed ceiling. He pressed a button on a wall panel, and the light dimmed, winked out, and a pattern of diamond-bright points appeared against the blackness above.

"Here is the Western Arm, as seen from Lotispa," he said. He adjusted controls. "Here are the worlds of men." As Yondor watched, a roughly spherical scattering of the light changed to an emerald green.

"As you see, we occupy a volume of space of almost two thousand cubic light-years—more than adequate to our needs. As for planets—"

"And how far did the empire of man extend in its day of power?"

"Power? I suppose you refer to militaristic expansion. . . ." The star-symbols overhead changed to blue, spreading out, covering most of the visible vault of sky.

"As you see, there was no need for such over-extension—"

"And the Tewks—how many of the former worlds of man do they hold?"

"Hmmm. I wouldn't put it just that way; we've abandoned certain areas, into which the Tewks may have later moved. . . ." Now yellow lights gleamed, blanking out the blue, spreading, covering the pseudo-sky, enveloping the green suns.

"Curious. . . ." the old man murmured. "I'd no idea the Tewk sphere of influence had assumed such a configuration."

"How did it look—twenty years ago?"

The old man manipulated controls. The enveloping yellow drew back from the Galactic South border of the human worlds. A few of the Tewk-held worlds turned green.

"Why—there seems to be almost a deliberate maneuver," the old man said. "And that cluster at the west—the Tewks have occupied them only recently. . . ."

Yondor was studying the constellations projected on the ceiling. "The stars look wrong," he said. "The belt of the Hunter is pulled out of shape, and the Wolf-cat is twisted so that I hardly know it."

"You're interested in astronomy?" the old man asked in surprise.

"I'm a hunter; I know the signs in the night sky."

"Yes; well, of course, from Lotispa you'd naturally see different configurations than from your home-world." He manipu-

lated controls; the stars flowed and shifted into new positions. "This is the sky as seen from Aldo Cerise. . . ." Another adjustment. "And from Northroyal—"

"Go back," Yondor said tensely. "Back to the first—Aldo Cerise."

The old man complied. "The Hunter's belt is more like that in my sky," Yondor said. "But the lower star—it rides higher, and the hilt of his sword is closer to his side."

"Hmmm." The old man's hands worked lightly over the controls. The shapes of the constellations changed. Yondor watched closely, correcting, directing, redirecting.

"The tail of the wolf-cat," he said. "If it was only twisted to the right rather than to the left. . . ."

THE old man made an adjustment. "Hold it there!" Yondor looked at him, his face dim in the gloom. "Now, old man—from what sun does the sky take this form?"

The curator mumbled over the console. "The closest is a small main-sequence sun called Rambo, deep within the Tewk Sector." He looked sharply at Yondor. "Does the name sound familiar?"

"No."

"There appear to be only two

planets: a massive world, close to the primary, and a smaller world with an eccentric orbit—"

"Can you find the code?"

"Why, yes, I suppose I could, by using the galactic coordinates—but—"

"Find it!"

"This is madness, Yondor! Guess-work—"

"Find it!"

The curator led the way out, along to the SRD index, punched buttons. A number appeared on the small view-screen. "Nine-three-six, seven-two-two," he read. "Now, let's just have a look here. . . ." He pressed other keys; printed text appeared on the screen. Yondor frowned, making out the letters with difficulty:

Rambo: type G-2, Class four. Classification, Utter Top Secret

"Here you are, my boy!" the old man exclaimed. "The inner world is—great heavens! It's a world called Zask—the capital of the Tewk Empire! As for the outer world—it's uninhabited; it was formerly known as Clett's World. No colonization, but a small Watcher Station was established there, some five hundred years ago, under a Captain Wilmott—"

"That was the name of the dead man who spoke to us!" Yondor burst out.

"What do you mean, lad?"

HE spoke from a small box—the voice of the dead Action Captain. He told us—but go on, what else does it say?”

“It seems that at the time the station was set up—under conditions of utmost secrecy—the Tewks had only recently established themselves on the inner world. It was already a major center of theirs, it seems, and the secret Watcher Station was set up to keep them under surveillance.”

“And then?”

“A conference was held; a settlement was reached. All terran claim to the system was ceded to the Tewk.”

“What about the Watcher Station?”

“No mention of it having been evacuated; just a reference to secret files.”

“It wasn’t evacuated,” Yondor said harshly. “The Crew stayed on. Then the ice came; the Crew went south. Now the ice has melted. We came back—and then the Tewks came. . . .”

“I can’t understand it,” the old man said. “Why weren’t the Crew taken off when the agreement was signed?”

“They were sent there to perform a duty,” Yondor said.

“But the treaty ended all that need for spying—”

“I think their mission was more than spying,” Yondor said. “And I think they stayed be-

cause it had not yet been carried out.”

“Tragic,” the old man said. “Those poor, wretched people, waiting on over the centuries, not knowing the war was over.”

“Can you code World into the transporter now?” Yondor asked abruptly.

The old man looked at him fearfully. “Yondor—you gave me your word—”

“I’ll cause no disturbance; I’ll enter the machine, and you’ll see no more of me.”

“But we have no assurance that the system will function; the distance is great—you’ll be fifty light-years inside Tewk territory—in the center of their worlds!”

“There are weapons here?” Yondor looked along the hall.

“Forget this, Yondor—”

“I’m going—with your help or without it, old man.” Yondor cut him off. “You can tell the fat men that I overpowered you.”

The old man studied his face, then nodded. “I can see your mind is set on it. Come along. I’ll do what I can for you.”

YONDOR hefted a heavy power gun, thrust it into the holster at his hip. “Thank you, old man,” he said. “Now go back and tell them I lied to you.”

“Yondor—you realize what you’re attempting?” the old man’s voice was a husky whisper.

"To free my Crew from the Tewks," he said shortly.

"But if you . . . use the gun," the old man eyed the weapon and shuddered. "More of them will come. You mustn't wait there. Use the transporter; bring your crew here, to Lotispa! Then the Tewks will never know. . . ."

"First I have to free the Crew; afterward—I don't know."

"Good luck, lad. I hope you find your people."

Yondor nodded, stepped into the transporter. The code had already been punched into the panel. He closed the door and pulled the lever down.

9

There was the now-expected shock, the dizziness, the whirling dust. Yondor felt his heart thumping as he eased open the door—and looked out into the lightless chamber beneath the machine that he had entered so many hours earlier. He stepped out, made his way in the gloom to the iron-railed stair, went up into the room above. All was silent, dark. He went to the closed door, listened. There was no sound. He took the power gun from the holster, set it on needle-beam as the old man had shown him, aimed it at the wall-switch. The metal glowed red, yellow, white, blue, then puffed to vapor. There was a heavy *clack* of metal

falling free. The door slid back at a touch, and Yondor looked out into darkness and falling rain.

With the gun still in his hand, he stepped out, went silently across the expanse of shattered rock to the dark mass of the ridge. Light glowed here; he raised his head cautiously, saw a huddle of Tewks around a small tent, and beyond it the shape of two of the flying sledges. He counted five Tewks. The light came from a small sphere that lay on the ground at the feet of the aliens. He had killed one of the four who had come in the first sledge; the second craft, it seemed, had brought two reinforcements.

For a half hour, Yondor watched. The Tewks, protected from the rain by their tight black garments, crouched, twittering. They seemed to be eating—stuffing small fragments of material from their hip-pouches into orifices at the base of their throats. In the near-darkness, Yondor could see the tall shadow of the machine, the shadows of the broken rock that littered the ground—and the forms of the seven Crew men and women, lying, as nearly as he could tell, where he had last seen them. Only the Captain was not in sight.

THERE were no other Tewks present, Yondor decided after listening for another fifteen min-

utes. To the east, a faint glow indicated the approaching sunrise. He had to act now—quickly—before daylight. He moved back down the slope, settled himself behind a large rock-fragment, then picked up a pebble, tossed it toward the Tewk camp-light.

The twitter ceased. He waited. A soft scrape of feet on rock. A second set of footsteps circling from the far right. The Tewks hadn't been fooled by the point of impact of the thrown stone; they were scouting out its source. Yondor gripped the gun, his teeth bared in a hunter's smile.

A small form moved from the shelter of a rock-slab, came almost silently across to another. Yondor heard small sounds, then a sharp scratch as of something drawn across a rough surface; Yondor closed his eyes, but through the lids he sensed that a brilliant light flared, moved quickly up to hover fifteen feet above the broken ground. He opened his eyes, shielding them from the direct glare. In black shadow, Yondor waited while the Tewk peered out through the gloom, an elaborate apparatus ready in its three-fingered hand. Off to the right, the second Tewk lay in what it considered adequate concealment. The Tewks, it was apparent, had not lived by hunting. Yondor holstered his gun, gripped a fist-sized rock.

The flare died, and at that instant Yondor was up, moving as silently as a shadow across to the position of the nearest Tewk. He reached, found the narrow back, brought the stone down with terrific force on the alien's head, caught the weapon from the slack hand, turned and glided back to his original position. There was a soft, tentative twitter from near the tent. The light was out now; the shadows were black, impenetrable. The rain hissed on the rocks. Above the hiss, Yondor heard the soft sound of movement; the Tewk who had been half concealed to his right emerged from the shelter of a rock, started past not ten feet distant. Yondor rose to a crouch, took two silent steps, smashed the stone down across the narrow skull and leaped over the falling body, dashing for a previously selected position. He rounded a rock-slab, barely visible even to his night-trained eyes—and was face to face with a Tewk. Without pausing, he brought his fist up in a short, vicious arc, felt pulp smash under his fist. He shoved the Tewk aside, crouched.

A SECOND flare glared above. There were only two of the enemy left now. But the advantage of surprise was gone; even their dull ears would have heard his last movements—and they

were armed with weapons that burned rock like rotten wood.

Ten minutes passed without a sound. Yondor edged cautiously around the shoulder of the rock, listening. Not a sound. That meant the remaining Tewks were lying in wait, prepared to let him come to them—or to wait for the light of day to shift the odds in their favor. It was noticeably lighter now; delay was to the enemy's advantage—not to his. He got to his feet, made his way along the length of the ridge, lay flat again, listening.

From the darkness, he heard a faint moan—a human sound. Yondor tensed, then moved forward, crouched. A dark form lay on the ground ahead. He came up to it, saw the gleam of white hair.

"Captain. . . ." He breathed the word. His hand found the other's chest, felt the shallow breathing, the rapid, fluttery pulse. He leaned closer.

"Yondor. . . ." The captain's voice was a ghost's whisper.

"Yes."

"You . . . right. Strange . . . stood there . . . all day. Others . . . lying in mud . . . rain. Little devils . . . paid us no attention. . . . Then . . . I . . . weak, fell . . . woke up . . . they . . . still here. . . ."

"Lie quietly, Captain," Yondor breathed in his ear. "There's only two left. I have a weapon—"

"Careful . . . don't let . . .

eyes. . . ." The voice died away in a sigh. The breathing went on. Yondor moved toward the position where he had seen the Tewks crouched around their light-globe. Too late, he heard the tell-tale scratch of a flare, threw himself toward the shelter of a remembered outcropping. The brilliant light glared, and a Tewk weapon gushed fire from the right. Yondor rolled, brought his power gun up, fired at the source of the blast, felt a sudden searing pain across his thigh. He tried again. There was a hissing scream and the Tewk weapon winked out. Yondor drew up his injured leg, his teeth grinding at the pain, felt charred cloth and flesh, the welling of blood. The alien weapon had burned a gouge half an inch deep and six inches long across his leg above the knee. He scrabbled forward, went down a two-foot drop-off, lay in its shelter. He was dizzy, sick, from the shock of the wound. Somewhere up above the last of the aliens would be hunting him now. It would have to come this way. He had reached the position he wanted: between the small tent and the waiting air sledges. The Tewk could not approach its equipment without coming into his line of fire. . . .

THE sky seemed full of red rockets; Yondor shook his head, fighting off the wave of

faintness. He couldn't lose consciousness now. He shook his head, hearing a roaring in his ears that seemed to drown out every other sound. His face felt cold and hot, at once. Tiny lights were whirling before him—and among the lights, a flicker of movement. . . .

Yondor fought his way back from the edge of unconsciousness, forcing his eyes to see, his ears to hear, straining to focus his attention on . . . something. There was a scrape, another, then the dull clink of metal on stone. The Tewk was very close now, crossing the broken ground to the left. He lifted the gun, heavy as a boulder, felt it waver in his hand. He blinked, peering through a filmy mist.

There was a sound from the right—a choked cry, a rattle of stone. Yondor saw the slight form of the Tewk dart from shelter, spin, fire at something off to the side—

His finger closed on the firing stud and the Tewk was enveloped in a livid radiance; then it was down, kicking on the rock, then still in the grey light of the early dawn. Yondor got to his knees. Smoke rose from the huddled body—and from a second body beyond. The captain had taken the Tewk's last shot.

"You decoyed him for me," Yondor muttered aloud. "Thanks, Captain. . . ."

There was a light in his face. Yondor opened his eyes, sat up, saw the frightened faces of the Crew around him. The sun gleamed through thinning cloud. Ten feet away, a still body, terribly burned, lay on its back, the silver hair ruffled in the wind, the hands folded on the dust.

"Yondor! You're alive!" Hush said. His face was haggard, hollow-cheeked. Yondor glanced at his leg, saw that it had been bound in strips torn from his shirt.

"I'm alive," he said. "Thanks to the Captain." He glanced across at the blackened form of a Tewk a few yards distant. "Did you find all five of them?"

"Yes—six. One was laid out in the tent. The other five—burned."

The crew were crowding around now.

"Yondor—what shall we do?"

"We have to get away from here, Yondor!"

Yondor looked past them at the tall machine. Painfully, he got to his feet, eager hands helping him. He limped across the broken ground, climbed up the rock ridge, stared at the vast complexity of the installation.

"What's that?" He pointed to a wire with a crimson tab wound over a pair of control levers on the panel.

"The Tewks—I saw them put it there," a man said. "I was lying in the mud; I couldn't move.

YONDOR stepped across to the narrow platform of metal that encircled the machine. He reached out, ripped the wires from the levers. They sprang up, and at once the panel lights winked on. The screen to the left glowed in a flickering pattern of greenish light.

"That's why the lights went out," Yondor said. "And the Talisman died. But now—" He turned to a crewman.

"Down below," Yondor said. "In the chamber under the machine. The talisman—bring it to me."

A man darted off; Yondor watched the screen. A minute passed. The messenger came back, the grey box on its leather strap dangling in his hand. Yondor took it; the cylinder, number 3, was still in position. He withdrew it, inserted number 4.

"These are final instructions, to be used only in the event negotiations result in Terran abandonment of the Rambo system," the voice of the dead Action Captain said briskly. "I take full personal responsibility for deviation from General Instruction. My analysis of the pattern of events over the last two decades of contact between human and Tewk forces has convinced me

that a subtle weapon is being employed by the enemy; this device has the effect of swaying the judgment of those responsible for the strategic deployment of Terran forces, as well as that of diplomatic missions entrusted with negotiation with the Tewk. For this reason, I have, upon my own initiative, arranged the present tactical situation—"

"I don't understand what the dead captain speaks of," a man said. "Leave this, Yondor, and we can hide ourselves in the forest —"

"Quiet!" Yondor listened as the voice went on.

". . . before the ceding of the inner world to the enemy, twelve standard years ago, I oversaw the placement of a planetary core reactor, for the ostensible purpose of power supply. However, certain additional arrangements were made at that time, which made it possible, by transmission of the proper signal, to cause the destructive detonation of the installation. I was also instrumental in implementing the construction of the Watcher Station and the installation of the powerful closed-beam communications equipment which is, of course, capable of transmitting the destruct signal. . . ."

"The dead man talks of magic," a woman said shrilly. "Lead us away from this place, Yondor!"

HE waved her to silence. ". . . necessity to evacuate the station; however, I cannot in conscience order execution of Project Tick Tock until it is clear that this important system will in fact be abandoned to the Tewk without a fight. I therefore herewith command you, my successor, to determine the precise status of Tewk-human relationships at the time of reactivation of the station, and, in the event the inner world is now Tewk-occupied, to carry out the plan. Instructions for execution follow." Yondor listened as the voice rapped out the sequence of numbers to be punched into the main panel of the communicator.

There was a sudden rasp of sound from the small screen on the face of the machine. Yondor whirled, looked into the pinched, wide-eyed face of a Tewk.

"Humans! Where are your friends, the garrison soldiers whom I dispatched to aid you . . . ?" The tinny voice broke off as the Tewk's gaze ranged past the huddle of men and women to the blackened forms of the five dead aliens lying where they had been placed by the Crew. The lidless eyes stared. The voice hissed.

"What has done this. . . ?"

"I did it!" Yondor shouted. "I killed them, as I kill all Tewks."

The voice, went on, unheeding. "Now, humans, you have made an error. I would have dealt soft-

ly with you, for slaves have a certain value, but now—" the Tewk broke off suddenly, turned away, leaving the screen blank. Yondor turned to the Crew behind him. "All of you—gather your weapons and whatever food and water we have! Wait for me on the plain beyond the pass—one hour, no more—"

"But you, Yondor! You'll lead us—"

"I'll join you as soon as I can. March! Now!"

"What will you do?"

"I'll carry out the orders of the dead Captain."

THE last of the Crew had disappeared through the pass half a mile distant across the plain. Yondor turned to the machine—and quickly, following the instructions he had received, punched the destruct code into the machine. His hand moved toward the EXECUTE switch—and paused. A face had appeared on the screen—a different Tewk this time—an older-looking one, with jeweled ears and a deep olive color.

"Listen well, fools of humans," it said in a shrill, deadly tone. "In my mercy I would have spared you to live on as pampered servants of the Tewk, but I see the blackened corpses of my soldiers, and my liver screams for vengeance! Your dying will not be easy. . . ." The ragged voice

went on. Yondor laughed, a short harsh sound, reached out and slammed home the EXECUTE control. A red light winked on—

Undisturbed, the voice of the Tewk continued its tirade. Yondor punched the control again. There was no further reaction. The light glowed steadily.

He turned away, his mind racing. The weapon of the Old Men had failed—but the Crew could fight on; they knew the trails and the dangers of the forests and swamps; their arrows could pierce Tewk hide—

There was a sound from below, and Yondor froze. Footsteps sounded: boots on loose stone. Two men—tall, short-haired, dressed in trim suits of pale blue—appeared from beneath the machine, stopped, staring up at him. Behind them, he saw the old man—the curator—bundled in a heavy coat. More men followed.

“Yondor!” the old man called. “They made me lead them here! They have guns! Don’t try to resist them!”

One of the men—a big fellow with hard eyes and much braid on his tunic—came forward. An ugly device, obviously a weapon was cradled in his arms.

“Throw down the pistol,” he commanded. Yondor complied.

“Now come down here. . . .” He broke off, his eyes straying to the screen where the small face raged on:

“. . . your bodies possess a terrible vitality,” the Tewk shrilled. “And under the implements of my finest surgeons, I will see them dissected alive, and I will see you nourished on your own organs, pulped and fed to you through tubes, and the days of your agony will not be weeks only, but months—years. . . !”

“Listen,” Yondor said; he pointed to the screen. “Your Tewk friend is talking. . . .”

“. . . alone here, far from the remaining pocket of the fools who are the last of your kind. There is no hope for you; never will they learn of your fate—and in a few short years, they too will know what it is to be non-Tewk in the Universe of the Tewk!”

The big man’s eyes darted from the screen to Yondor. He waved the gun. “Get away from that panel!”

YONDOR looked at the screen, where the Tewk raved on. “I followed the dead Captain’s instructions,” he said “The weapon failed. It has been too long; time has won the victory for the enemy.” He turned numbly, stepped down to the ridge of rock, made his way limping, down to the waiting group of men.

“Colonel—look at these!” One of the men was pointing at the blackened bodies of the dead Tewks.

"Quiet!" The Colonel turned to the old man. "That's Keulipit, the Tewk Minister of Enlightenment, isn't it, Doctor?" he snapped the question.

"Yes—I'd know those features anywhere . . . but what is he saying? Has he gone mad?"

". . . in less than another decade the last of your vile kind will have been quietly devoured, and your sickly race wiped from the faces of reality. Your fates will be a foretaste of what all your kind soon will know of Tewk power!"

"He's raving like a rabid dog!"

Yondor gave a short, harsh laugh. "Man and Tewk will live together in harmony, you said. The harmony they plan will be the mingling of Tewk laughter with human screams!"

"Silence! the Colonel snapped. "Keulipit obviously doesn't realize he's being overheard—"

"Is he blind?" Yondor said. "We stand in full view."

The Colonel ignored him, his eyes narrowed, watching the face on the screen.

"The inner world is some three light-minutes distant," the curator said quietly to Yondor. "It took that long for the signal to reach him, and to return—"

Yondor looked up, a new light in his eyes. "Where does the inner world lie?" He spoke quickly.

"At this point in the local annual cycle—I would say—about

there. . . ." The old man raised a hand.

At that instant a point of light appeared against the blue sky, gleamed brighter, grew to dazzling brilliance, then, as the men watched dumfounded, slowly faded.

"Look—the screen's gone dark!" a man shouted, pointing.

"What's happened?"

The Colonel was looking at Yondor, his teeth bared in shock. "You—at the machine!"

Yondor squared his shoulders, waiting for the shot that would cut him down.

"I followed the orders of the dead Captain," he said.

"A bomb—planted at the heart of the Tewk empire," said the old man in awe. "Waiting for five hundred years."

"Now we have no choice," the Colonel said. "There'll be . . . war . . . because one man tripped a time bomb that destroyed a world. . . ." He held the gun steady on Yondor's chest. Yondor waited, his eyes on the other's.

THE Colonel lowered the gun. But I heard Keulipit speak before he died. His plans for humanity are somewhat different from what our negotiators were led to believe."

"I knew it," the old man said in a choked voice. "As soon as I saw the envelopment they've car-

ried out, I knew—but I was afraid to admit I knew—even to myself.”

“We have a fleet—mothballed,” the Colonel said grimly. “We’ll meet them; it’s not too late.” He turned to the old man. “I’ll think up a story to cover you, Doctor. We’ll go back, now—my report —”

“But—what about Yondor and his people?” The curator touched the officer’s arm.

The colonel looked back at Yondor. “Maybe he should be shot.” He laughed shortly. “But I’m not the man to shoot him.”

“Let us fight with you,” Yondor said.

“You? Savages dressed in skins?”

“We can learn; there are eighteen hundred of us—”

One of the uniformed men

came up to the Colonel, showed him something. Yondor stepped to the two men, held out a hand. “That’s mine, now.” The Colonel looked at him, handed over the heavy silver eagles on their leather thong that had been taken from the dead Captain. Yondor slipped the loop over his neck.

“I am Action Captain now,” he said. “Give my Crew a ship.”

The Colonel looked at him, eyeing the old insignia of rank. Then he smiled, just a brief twitch of his lips. “Very well, Action Captain. I’ll see that you get your chance.”

Yondor felt an answering smile at the corners of his mouth. He raised his hand in the gesture a crewman gives his captain.

The Colonel returned the salute.

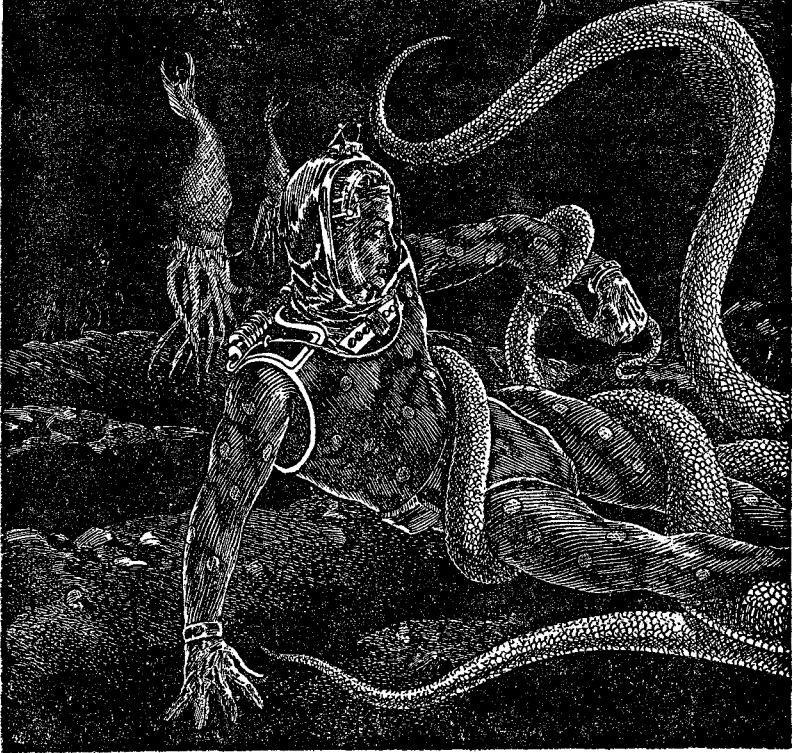
“Carry on,” he said.

THE END



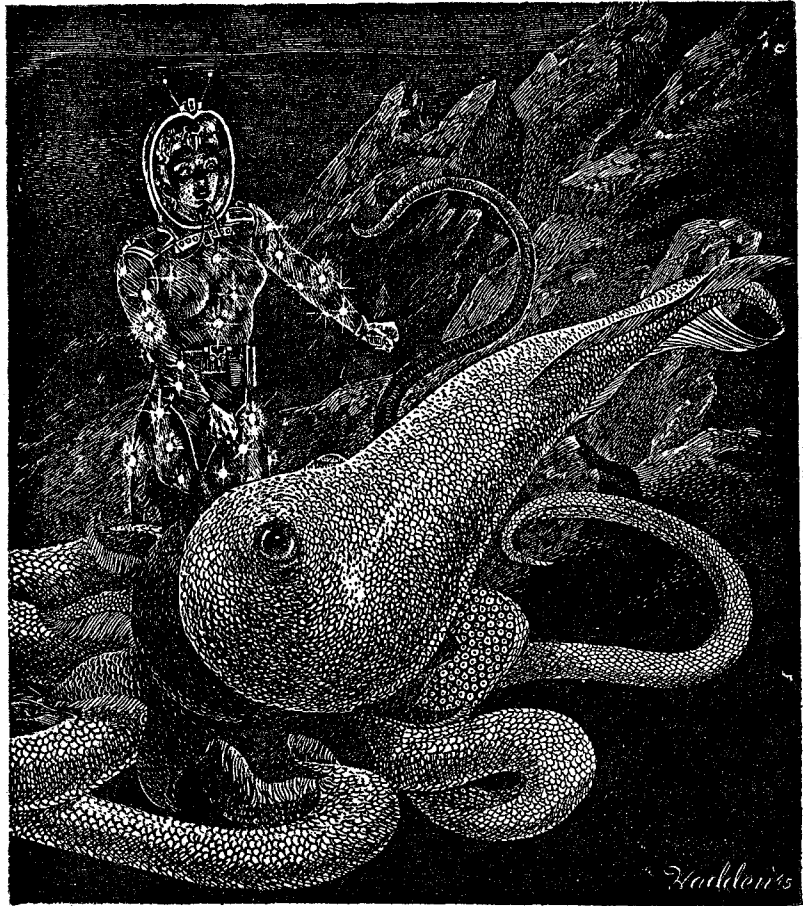
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FINAL VICTIM



BY HENRY HASSE and RAY BRADBURY

Just after the end of World War II, two talented writers sat down to work on the story you are about to read. One of them, Henry Hasse, was a professional, probably best known for "He Who Shrank" (a remarkable story about sub-atomic universes), which first appeared in Amazing Stories for 1936. The other was young Ray Bradbury, still struggling to make his mark as a writer, but destined to go so far (with such marvelous books as The Martian Chronicles and Fahrenheit 451) that today every story he has writ-



ILLUSTRATOR HADDEN

ten or collaborated on now has special literary interest for his critics and readers. That's why we are glad to bring back "Final Victim" (first published in 1946). Although you may not be able to tell what is pure Hasse or early Bradbury (after all, this is a successful collaboration), we know you will enjoy it as pure story, especially when you see what Hasse and Bradbury make out of the twisted motives of Patrolman Jim Skeel, who ruthlessly gunned down fourteen desperate criminals and went out looking for his final victim.

THE space-suited figure scrambled frantically over the edge of the ragged asteroid cliff, and lay panting from the exertion of the long climb upward. The pale face beneath the helmet was drawn in a tight grimace as it stared at the tiny Patrol ship on the plain below. No access to it now! He was trapped.

The young man rose to his feet, stared down the steep ravine he had just traversed. He saw the plodding figure of the Patrolman coming up toward him. There was a frightening relentlessness about that figure. He caught a dull glint of metal and knew the Patrolman had drawn his atomblast.

"If only I hadn't lost my gun, down there!" And then he laughed bitterly, for he knew he never would have used it. He stepped out in plain sight, threw his hands up in the universal gesture of surrender. His mind was awry with bitter thoughts. He had never killed anyone in all his life! But the Patrol thought he had, and that's what counted now. He was glad it was all over. He would surrender, go back and face trial though the evidence was all against him.

Now the Patrolman's bulging, space-suited figure loomed up before him just ten yards away. He raised his hands still higher to make sure the other saw them.

The Patrolman saw them all

right. His lips parted in a wide grin beneath his Crystyte plate. He lifted his big hand, full of dull metal, and took careful aim at the young man limned against the cobalt heaven.

There was something strange, and wrong, in the big Patrolman's grin. The youth waved frantically with his hands and screamed terrified words that only echoed inside his helmet until his eardrums rang. This was crazy! This couldn't happen! It was never in the Patrol's code to kill men in cold blood. . . .

His thoughts abruptly ceased. His helmet plate shattered inward and his face was a mask of red. He screamed, but it ended in a gurgling moan, as he tried with futile fingers to tear out the slug that was chewing at his brain. He sank to his knees, toppled over the cliff and did a crazy jerking dance as his gravity plates pulled him to the rock eighty feet below.

Jim Skeel, Patrolman, still grinned.

"Number fourteen," said he, and holstered his gun.

Jim Skeel stalked triumphantly down to the base of the cliff. He exulted with all six-feet-four of his big sun-parched body. He felt the palms of his hands a little sweaty as he clenched and unclenched them, and a curious tremor came over him as he viewed the body lying there. The

familiar pounding of blood was in his temples again, a hot, fierce pounding.

For a long moment he closed his eyes tight and pressed hard fists against his temples and stood there trembling. But the fierce remembrance would not go away, as he knew it would not. Again the scene was with him that had haunted him through the years. Once again the flash of electro-guns tore through his tortured brain, and he saw defenseless men all about him dying and he heard their screams as they died. . . .

He stood quite still until his trembling stopped and that feeling went away. Then with his toe he nudged the young man's body so that it rolled over, and the pale leprous sunlight licked at the blood-masked features. "Pretty good shot," Skeel grunted. He bent and searched the body, retrieving all identification cards.

A SUDDEN dark shadow swept over the scene. Skeel looked up, startled. Then he knew what it was. Utter night had come without any warning, as it always did on these slowly rotating asteroids. Toward the caverns and crannies at the base of the cliff he glimpsed vague horrid things, pale and wriggling, with sensitive amoeboid tentacles where eyes should have been. He heard

strange sibilances from these asteroid creatures who hated light but loved the dark and loved blood, which they got too seldom.

Skeel arose hastily and hurried to his Patrol cruiser a short distance away. He looked back only once, and glimpsed scores of the vague nightmare shapes swarming over a prone human form there in the cliff shadow.

CHAPTER II

Arriving at the Federation Patrol headquarters on Ceres Base, Skeel eased his solo cruiser into the glassite dome with an expert hand. None of the men spoke to him. They tried not even to look at him. But if Jim Skeel noticed this he gave no indication. He sauntered over to the door marked "Commander" and entered without knocking.

Commander Anders looked up from his desk. At sight of Skeel his leather jaw tightened a little. A look of distaste flashed into his steel gray eyes.

"Reporting, sir," said Skeel. He carefully, a little too carefully, spread out the identification cards he had taken from the fugitive's pockets.

Anders rose slowly to his feet. His knuckles were white as he placed his fists on the desk and leaned tautly forward.

"You didn't capture the man?"

Anders' voice was a monotone, as though he had asked that question more than once.

"Sorry, sir. He's dead."

"Dead." There was not much of surprise in Anders' voice. Then the voice and the gray eyes became simultaneously harder. "Did you kill him?"

"Kill him, sir?" Skeel's eyebrows arched. "No sir. I had to chase him clear to Asteroid 78 in the Lanisar Group, and there he fell off a cliff. I only had time to get his identification cards and get away, before the night creatures came swarming out. Sorry. . . ."

Anders kicked his chair back against the wall and came surging around the desk. He was white-faced. "Sorry! You're not sorry, Skeel! In God's name, how do you have the ghastly nerve to come back here each and every time? How can you face me—no, more than that, how can you face your conscience? I wonder what goes on inside that riveted skull, behind that papier-mâché expression of yours!" He paused and drew a breath. "What makes you kill, Skeel? How many does this make—eleven? Twelve?"

Skeel sighed, and spread his hands in an exaggerated gesture. "You always were a long winded louse, sir. There are Miller's papers. And I didn't kill him. He fell off a cliff. Is that all, sir?"

"No! That's not all!" Anders

came even closer, and glared up at Skeel who towered above him. "You've been in the Patrol a long time, Skeel. Luckily, or I should say unluckily, your previous good record and your seniority permits you to get away with this—until we prove something. Some day you'll slip and we *will* prove it. I pray that day'll come soon!"

SKEEL'S own eyes, which had been amused, now took on a hard glint. He spoke and his voice was different.

"Since you bring up the subject of my seniority, let me remind you that it would permit me to take your place here if I so chose. I do not so choose—yet. As to the other thing you imagine about me, I could tell you a story, sir. A story that—" He stopped abruptly as the fierce rush of blood came to his throbbing temples again.

"Yes, man, go on! You were about to tell me why you kill." Anders waited. "Weren't you!"

"No, sir." Skeel's voice was a whisper now, but controlled.

"I know you must have some sort of hellish reason. But whatever the reason, it's an insult to everything you learned in the Federation Patrol! All right, Skeel, I'll tell you something about young Miller, your latest victim. He was innocent, do you hear? Innocent! The evidence against him was purely circum-

stantial, but now he has been cleared! I just got the news an hour ago!"

"You got the news—here? How?"

"Never mind how. It's authentic!"

Skeel didn't move a muscle. His face became a little paler and his eyes widened momentarily. Then his face was an impassive mask again.

"You see, Skeel?" Anders was livid with suppressed fury now. "Any normal man would squirm at the news I just told you! Any decent man would blow his brains out at the thought of the ghastly thing he'd done! But not you, Skeel. No, not you, because you're neither a decent nor a normal man any longer! You've allowed this thing to get hold of you until it's a fetish, it's warped your brain, and now it's become a sadistic pleasure . . . this killing. . . ." Anders choked and couldn't go on.

"Is that all, sir?"

"That sure as hell is all! Isn't it enough? Get out of here! Get your filthy face out of my sight before I smash it to pulp."

SKEEL'S lips became a tight slash across his square-featured face. He turned on his heel and strode stiffly out.

With an effort Anders stifled the rising anger in him. He strode across the room to the op-

posite door. It was slightly ajar. He flung it open.

The girl sitting in the next room looked up, but seemed to stare through Anders rather than at him. Her slender uniformed figure was unbending as crystal, her knuckles white as she gripped the arms of the chair. Her eyes, an unbelievable blue, were now misted with the shock of horror. She didn't bother to brush back the lock of taffy-toned hair that had fallen down against the pallor of her cheek.

Anders spoke.

"You heard, Miss Miller?" he said quietly.

Her breath caught in her throat and it took her some seconds to speak. When she did, her voice was terrible in its tonelessness.

"Yes, I heard . . . quite enough, Commander. Thanks."

"I'm truly sorry you had to learn about it this way! But I wanted you to see the man who killed your brother. You wouldn't have believed me otherwise."

"I—still find it a little hard to believe—and to understand." She rose very slowly and stood facing him. There was a world of contempt in her voice. "The Patrol never kills! *That's* what we've learned to believe. *That's* become a motto on three planets. The Patrol, the noble Patrol, guardians of the spaceways! What mockery! Why was my brother killed,

Commander? Why is such a monster as this man Skeel allowed—"

"Miss Miller, please. I know it's hard for you, or any outsider to understand, but you must try. Skeel was once one of the best men we had. His reputation was clean as flame, and on the records it still is. Very few men stand above him in seniority, and in the Patrol that's what counts, because—"

"That's what counts, is it? I came here to Ceres from Mars, bringing my brother's release papers, only to learn that you'd sent this Skeel out after him; all the time *knowing*—"

Anders sighed, and spread his hands helplessly. "I see you still don't understand. But please believe me, if I'd known your brother was innocent I wouldn't have allowed Skeel to accept this assignment; no, not even if I'd had to ray him down and face court-martial for it! It was Skeel's mission if he wanted it. It was his prerogative to accept or refuse the assignment, and he never refuses them. And Miss Miller, I hope *this* will mean something to you: there's hardly a man in the Patrol who doesn't suspect Skeel for what he is, and hate him for it; but I doubt if any of 'em, given the chance, would obliterate him in cold blood. You see the code is ingrained deeply in these men. As

yet there's no proof that Skeel is a killer."

"You speak glibly of proof," the girl echoed mockingly. "Why don't you *get* proof?"

"I'm going to! Personally. A frame-up is the only way. But it'll be hard, because the man always works alone."

"Yes, and then there is always the code against you. Well, Commander, I have no such code to hamper me, and I am going to avenge my brother!" Nadia Miller's face, ordinarily lovely, was not lovely now. "I have a plan. I could use your help, but with or without your help I am going through with it. All I want is to get this man Skeel back out to those rocks—alone."

ANDER'S smiled tolerantly. "That would be a dangerous thing, especially for a girl. Skeel's a deadly killer, an expert shot. And you'd be on your own; the Patrol couldn't sanction any such plan."

"Naturally, Commander. Will you listen to me for five minutes? I'll tell you how to get this man out of the Patrol before he kills other people whose only crime was a momentary mental disturbance." Her face clouded with pain as she thought of her brother.

Anders listened as she unfolded her plan. When he spoke again, there was less of doubt in his

voice and a respectful admiration in his eyes.

"Miss Miller, I like your plan and I agree to it for one reason only. It has an advantage over anything I could attempt. Skeel suspects me now, and will see to it that any future assignment he accepts is fool-proof; but your idea might turn that very caution against him."

"I hope so. And you needn't worry about me. I know most of those big rocks in the asteroid belt well enough."

"All right. At least I can set the stage for you, and I wish I could do more." Anders looked at her with a sudden new interest, admiring the firm line of her chin, the trimness of her space uniform, the hard bold blueness of her eyes which he imagined could easily be soft on less drastic occasions than this. With an effort he brought his mind back to the immediate problem. "It will be at least a week from now. Ceres is no place for you, but since you're here I suggest you go over to Ceres City, the mining town on the other side of our little planet. I'll keep in touch with you and let you know just when to pick up your solo cruiser. Okay? Goodbye for now—and good luck!"

For three days Anders haunted the helio tower, doggedly flashing signals in the direction of Ganymede, currently the near-

est of Jupiter's satellites. Their entire plan would depend on how soon the Ganymede Base received these signals. Sometimes atmospheric conditions weren't right, and it took days to get a message through.

He was lucky. On the third day he received the answering flash that told him his signal had been picked up. Quickly he checked the orbital positions of both planets, then sighted the huge silvery screens carefully and locked them into place. Manipulating the shields with expert fingers, Anders began his message.

HELLO GANYMEDE. CERES BASE SENDING. ANSWER!

Minutes later it came:

CONDITIONS OKAY. GANYMEDE BASE SENDING. GO AHEAD CERES.

ANDERS' fingers were lightning fast as he operated the rows of levers controlling the solar shields. He tried to be terse, for there was no time to waste, and it took minutes for a message to cross such vast reaches of space.

MOST IMPORTANT. WANT ANY AVAILABLE NEWS ON THE LONELY ONE. HIS LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS PRESENT POSITION AND ACTIVITIES. ANDERS.

Anders' fingers were lightning fast as he operated the rows of levers controlling exertion. Usually it took a two-man crew to manipulate those shields. He

smoked a cigarette as he awaited the answer.

Minutes later it came, transmitted into little electric flashes on the screen above his head.

WHAT GOES ON? THAT PIRATE IS OUR MEAT SO HANDS OFF. ESCAPED OUR TRAP TWO WEEKS AGO BUT IS NOW BELIEVED OPERATING FROM SECRET CALLISTO BASE. HE'S OURS! SPURLIN.

Anders leaped for the levers and threw the following message:

THREE DAYS FROM NOW FLASH NEWS HERE THAT THE LONELY ONE IS HEADED BELTWARD. MUST SOUND AUTHENTIC BUT DO NOT TRANSMIT TO EARTH HEADQUARTERS. PERSONAL FAVOR. EXPLAIN LATER.

The answer read:

OKAY ANDERS YOU'LL GET YOUR MESSAGE BUT I HOPE YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND I'LL WANT THAT EXPLANATION. DID I EVER TELL YOU THE ONE ABOUT—

The little flashes on the screen continued, but Anders didn't stay to watch. He descended the tower stairs and found Lohss, the regular helio man, over in the barracks.

"Okay," he told Lohss. He had explained to him that he was merely making a routine check-up on the equipment. When the message about the Lonely One came, he wanted it to be a distinct surprise to every man here.

It was. It came three and a half

days later. Lohss shoved excitedly into Anders' little office, waving one of the official helio pads.

"Here's something I thought you ought to see right away, Commander."

Anders read the message:

ATTENTION CERES BASE! MARS-BOUND FREIGHTER FROM GANYMEDE MINES RAMMED AND LOOTED. HANDIWORK OF THE LONELY ONE. HE IS HEADING TOWARD THE ASTEROIDS. SOLID BLACK ONE-MAN CRUISER AS USUAL. FULL ARMAMENT. GET BUSY AND GOOD LUCK!

Anders smiled to himself and was grateful to Spurlin over on Ganymede for coming through so nicely.

SOON Ceres Base was ringing with the news. Every man there had dreamed of being some day sent on the Lonely One mission. To bring in that famous pirate would be a feather in anyone's cap, and would mean immediate promotion. Consequently it was with mumblings and displeasure that the men saw Jim Skeel stalk arrogantly into Commander Anders' office.

"Good morning, sir. You sent for me?"

"I did, Skeel. I guess you've heard the news about the Lonely One. Want to make a try for him? Just the job for *you*." The tinge of contempt in Anders' voice didn't go unnoticed.

Nor did the little hint of cun-

ning that he couldn't keep out of his eyes. Skeel said:

"You never were anxious to send me out before, Commander. This couldn't be some plan of yours to get rid of me?" He smiled a little, but there was no humor in it.

"It doesn't matter this time, Skeel. There's a dead or alive warrant on the Lonely One. But I don't mind telling you this is the chance I've been waiting for! You're a killer and so is the Lonely One. I'll be praying that he gets you first, so the Patrol will be rid of scum like you."

Skeel's eyes narrowed. "When do I leave?"

"Soon's you can get your cruiser ready. You're sure you want to handle this alone? You can select a crew, up to six men."

Skeel laughed aloud. "Do you think any of 'em would ride with me? Don't worry, Anders, I'll bring back the Lonely One—alive."

"You needn't pretend with *me* any more, Skeel."

"Very well, sir. Goodbye."

"Goodbye—but not good luck." Anders ignored the proffered hand. Skeel stiffened, then turned and strode for the door, exiting quickly.

ANDERS sank back in his chair, procured a cigarette and lit it thoughtfully. Now the doubts were beginning to crowd

in. Nadia Miller had been overwrought and full of revenge. Suppose she did know the asteroids as well as she knew her own library? Skeel did, too, and he was ruthless and cunning. Suppose she did have the fastest cruiser this side of Mars? Skeel was the best solo spaceman in the Patrol.

Anders viciously ground out the burning end of his cigarette. He thought of Nadia Miller's tense but pretty face again, her trim figure and bright hair and hard blue eyes that he wanted to see soft. If anything happened to that girl—

But there was nothing he could do now. Nothing, except face an agony of waiting.

CHAPTER III

Jim Skeel leaped to his controls, as the Visipanel came to life with a tiny gash of flame that tore a hole in the blackness of space. That would be the Lonely One again! Feverishly he changed his course in a sharp parabola toward the rocket blasts far ahead.

He would keep that ship within range this time! Reaching to the V-panel, he twisted the magnifying dial. The blackness swam and expanded. The tiny orange rocket blasts seemed to leap backward at him. He had to look closely to distinguish the outline of the ship, but then he

grunted with satisfaction. It was the solid black solo cruiser, all right. It bore absolutely no insignia, strictly against the Space Code.

Skeel grinned through his weariness. For more than twenty hours he had played hide and seek with that elusive black cruiser. He could never quite get within beam range, and sometimes he lost it out of his V-panel altogether. Once it had led him straight into the Kennison Group of asteroids, a vast expanse of treacherous rocks with wild, eccentric orbits. This was sheer suicide for cruisers as tiny as theirs, minus the repulsion plates to shunt the rock masses from them. Skeel, in a cold sweat of horror, had finally given up the chase. He had laboriously circled the entire Kennison Group, and now—

Now he had picked up the Lonely One again! He couldn't deny a thrill of admiration as he realized the black ship must have threaded its way *entirely through* the Kennison Group! Well, he would not lose it again. It was still out of beam range, but he should be able to keep it centered in his V-panel.

Skeel threw over the lever feeding his tubes full blast. He exulted at the new fierce surge of power as his ship leaped ahead. *But this time the Lonely One didn't try to outrace him!* The black

ship came nearer and nearer. Skeel's eyes narrowed. The pirate was supposed to have a much faster ship than his! Could this be some trick? He twisted the magnifying dial again, bringing his quarry more sharply into focus.

Then Skeel laughed aloud, laughed exultantly as he saw the reason for the other's lack of speed. The black cruiser was limping along on only four rocket tubes! Two other tubes, on the starboard side, were smashed and mangled hopelessly. Apparently the pirate hadn't come through that asteroid swarm unscathed after all!

THIS was the break for which Skeel had been waiting. Calmly now with deadly precision he sighted his forward electro-gun control. His fingers leaped to the distance gauge and set the charge to its fullest power. He heard the increasing whine of the coils. Still his gaze was riveted on the V-panel dial, watching the rapidly diminishing distance. Two hundred miles. One hundred. Fifty. There! Electrobeams were deadly at that distance. He glanced at the sights, saw they were perfect . . . and depressed the forward electrobutton.

A crackling, radiant blue beam lashed from the prow of his craft and seemed to uncoil across the

miles of space. Simultaneously a little bubble of color leaped backward from the pirate cruiser. Swift as light it came, expanding into a huge sphere of crimson. Skeel's electro-beam struck the sphere. It burst in a coruscating riot of writhing sparks that leaped back along the beam, devouring it hungrily.

Skeel's hand darted out to shut off the power. It was too late. The electro-gun coils burst from their housing in a shower of incandescent wire and metal, as a strong smell of ozone pervaded the ship. Skeel cursed in pain, clapping a hand to his arm where a white-hot strand of wire had struck.

"So that's that!" he gritted fiercely. "Not close enough yet to use the Tynyte bombs." There was nothing to do now but continue the chase, and Skeel saw that it wouldn't last long. Indirectly ahead was a bright dot of sunlight which must have been an asteroid of considerable size. The pirate ship was veering, limping toward it on crippled rockets. Skeel followed, closing in fast. He was sure of his quarry now! When it came to close combat on these big rocks, he was a past master.

THE rock loomed up. It was a big one all right, nearly twenty miles in diameter with dangerous plateaus and ugly serrated

cliffs reaching up. The pirate seemed in pell-mell panic now. The black ship swung in perilously near, made one complete circuit of the rock and landed on a tiny plateau with a shallow sweep that must have sheared part of the under-hull away! Skeel brought his own cruiser down with ease, several hundred yards distant.

Even as he was adjusting his helmet and gravity plates, he glimpsed a space-suited figure leaping away from the black ship. Skeel exited quickly, snatched out his electro-pistol and took careful aim. He fired.

The distance was a little too great. The beam hacked down, cutting a shallow path in the rock immediately behind the running figure. The figure looked back but didn't stop running. Skeel grunted and went leaping after it in long swinging strides. He was very casual and confident now. This was all so familiar. . . .

Familiar? It was *too* darned familiar! Skeel stopped and shielded his eyes against the surface glare of sunlight. He stared at the low line of cliffs toward which the figure was running. A strange, insistent hammering seemed to pound away at Skeel's brain. And then, with a little thrill he knew! This was the same asteroid where he had chased his last quarry, in circumstances very similar to this!

Those might be the very cliffs where he had killed young—what was his name? Didn't matter now.

Skeel leaped forward again. For a moment he kept the figure in sight; then it seemed to dissolve in the sunlight and disappear. That puzzled him, until he came very close and saw a little cave mouth in the bosom of the cliff. It was there his quarry had fled. Skeel chuckled deep in his throat. He loosened the gun in his belt. Swell! It was as good as over now. Whenever he got *this* close to the victim, he stuck with it to the finish.

Skeel stood just within the darkened cave, listening, pistol clutching in his corded hand. A narrow passage seemed to lead slightly downward. Far along it he saw a dim light glow that was not sunlight.

He made his way carefully toward that phenomenon. Soon the sides of the rocky cave were sprinkled with little flat creatures about the size of a silver dollar. They were miniature beacons, exuding light through their tenuous, transparent surfaces! Yet it wasn't phosphorescence. Skeel stopped to examine one of them. It was more like actual sunlight, but there was no heat. He touched one of them gingerly, the light immediately went out and it became the same gray color of the stone to which it clung.

Skeel plunged on. Soon the walls became thick with the blazing things. But as he ran by, the vibration of his leaden shoes seemed to frighten them. They blinked off, huge patches of them, remaining gray and quiescent till he had passed. Then they came on again. As a result he was running in a constant little patch of darkness, with light ahead and light behind, but always darkness where the reverberation of his pounding feet frightened the button-lichen things.

THE tunnel turned and twisted, and several other large ones branched from it. There was no further sight of his quarry. Skeel moved more slowly now. He clicked on his helmet radio but heard no sound of receding feet. Nevertheless he knew his quarry had passed this way not many minutes before, because a few of the light-creatures ahead of him were blinking on again laggardly. Grim-lipped now, a weapon in hand, Skeel pressed on a little more slowly and watched and listened.

He stopped in a dim little grotto where three tunnel mouths gaped. He hesitated, then chose the tunnel to the left and proceeded along it with infinite caution. Still there was no sign his quarry had come this way. Skeel suddenly realized he had acted with foolhardy recklessness. This

might be a trap! He started to turn back.

"Stand right where you are!"

The words rasped through his helmet phones and echoed in his ears. Something jabbed into his ribs with a viciousness that made him grunt.

Skeel slowly raised his arms, but the voice rasped again:

"Don't raise your hands! Drop them to your side. Slowly! That's it. Now drop your gun."

Skeel did so. The figure behind him swooped and picked it up.

"Now you can turn around."

Skeel did that too, then expressed himself in three thunderous words.

"Blazes! A female!"

"Sure. But don't let it give you ideas." She stepped back a pace keeping the two pistols carefully centered on him.

"A trick!" bellowed Skeel. "This is Anders' work, I might have known it!"

"No. It's my work." Her voice was soft in the phones, and her smile beneath the helmet was hardly a smile; it showed teeth, but they were no more gleaming than the ice-hard gleam in her blue eyes. "My work," she repeated. "And now that you know I'm not the Lonely One, I shall tell you who I really am. The name's Nadia Miller."

She saw the dawn of realization in his eyes.

"Miller," she said again slowly,

ly, savoring the word. "My brother was Arnold Miller—the man you killed."

"Look here, Miss Miller, I'm afraid you've got this figured out wrong. I knew your brother, sure. I was after him. But I didn't kill him, he fell off—"

"He fell off a cliff. I don't doubt it, after you got through with him." She gestured imperatively with the gun in her right hand. "All right, walk ahead of me. Move!"

SKEEL shrugged and obeyed, watching the clusters of light-creatures blink off at the reverberation of their steps. For five minutes they continued in silence, in their continuous little patch of darkness. They made several turns as the tunnel angled sharply. Finally Skeel said:

"Where are you taking me?"

"Out to your Patrol cruiser. There you'll sign a written confession, or I'll kill you. I almost hope you'll refuse to sign it."

"We won't get out of here at this rate! I'm afraid you made a wrong turn to the left back there."

"I don't think so. Just keep moving because if I bump into you, one of these pistols might go off."

Skeel cursed but kept moving, because she sounded as though she meant it.

"That was a neat trick of

yours," he said, "coming clear through that rogue group of asteroids."

"I thought so. Of course, I hoped you'd follow me and never come out of there."

"Kind of a risky chance to take, wasn't it?"

"It was worth it—even if it didn't work out."

"I don't think this'll work out either. We're going in the wrong direction, back into the cliff instead of out."

"Just keep moving."

They walked on.

She called a stop at the next intersection, where a much narrower passage came into theirs at a sharp angle. She hesitated, looking around.

"I told you," Skeel chuckled. "You're lost. You made two wrong turns, but luckily for us I noticed them. Want me to go back and show you?"

"No! Keep moving straight ahead." She didn't sound very confident.

This time Skeel didn't move. "Listen," he said grimly. "Do you realize it'll soon be night out there? Maybe it's come already!"

"Well?"

"Well!" he repeated in amazement, whirling to face her in the dim light. "Do you mean to say you aren't familiar with a night on an asteroid? Especially a lone one this big?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that when night comes on these big rocks, strange things come out to greet it; creatures that stir and scramble out of the crevices, tentacular things that hate the sunlight but come out in the dark and are plenty dangerous! Usually the dark side of an asteroid is thick with 'em. This is one such asteroid. I've been here before."

"You can't frighten me." But her little gasp belied the words. "Anyway, I've made up my mind. We'll wait until morning."

Now he laughed. "Morning? That'll be ten hours from now. This planet has a very slow axial rotation. Know how much oxygen we have left in these tanks? About four hours' worth. We haven't time to stand here talking. I'm going to try to make it back out to the cruiser. You can do as you please."

IGNORING the weapons in her hands, Skeel strode past her. She hesitated a split second, then followed. She knew he was right about the oxygen, but wondered how much of the rest he was making up, trying to trick her. Anyway, so long as she still had the weapons. . . .

Skeel had been right. He made several turns and the route led gradually upward. She felt foolish for not having thought of that herself. Presently Skeel called:

"There we are!"

Peering past him, she glimpsed a little circle of light that was the cave entrance. Skeel raced forward. She quickly followed. The entrance loomed before them, but they stopped abruptly. Between them and the outside surface was a dark stretch of tunnel. Beyond it they could plainly see the wide rocky terrain, and the bluish-silver glint of the Patrol cruiser resting in pale sunlight. But night had already come. The ebon shadow of the cliff was creeping slowly out, swallowing up everything. It had almost reached the cruiser.

"It's too late," Skeel groaned. "We're stuck here now!"

SHE suddenly knew there was no trickery in this. "There's still time! Run for it!"

"No! . . . Mechanically Skeel's hand darted out to stop her. But already she was past him, hurrying down the last part of the tunnel.

Skeel followed slowly, knowing she wouldn't go far. His sharp eyes had glimpsed something she had not yet seen: shapeless, writhing masses surging toward them in the darkness. He was right behind her when she screamed. Several tenacular things had reared up to claw blindly at her face-plate. She screamed, staggered backward into Skeel and half raised her hand holding an electro-pistol.

But before she could fire, her legs seemed turned into rubber, and she fainted in a heap at Skeel's feet.

"Thought so," Skeel grunted. "You can only go so far on raw nerve; then it lets you down." He dragged her back several yards into the artificial light. Her hands still held tightly to the pistols. Skeel smiled grimly, reached slowly down and took both weapons.

She swam up out of a sea of darkness. A blaze of light hurt her eyes. Sitting up, she saw she was still in the cave, at a place where the button-light creatures were thickest.

A short distance away at the edge of the darkness Skeel was crouched, peering. Presently he came back to her.

"Hello, Miller. I was just taking a survey of our little pets out there. The place is lousy with 'em; but don't worry, they won't come too near this light."

She got to her feet hurriedly and eyed the two weapons in his belt. "I might have known you'd take advantage—"

"What do you expect? I can't afford to be running around on an asteroid with an armed woman at my heels."

She looked past him into the darkness. "Doesn't look as if we're going to do any more running."

"That's right, lady; it doesn't.

"We're in a pretty bad spot." He drew one of the pistols. "So you may as well have this." He tossed it to her and she caught it deftly.

"Thanks," she said dryly. "Now how do you know I won't kill you with it? That's what I came out here to do, you know."

"Uh-huh, but you won't. Know why? The vibration of that beam would turn out every light in this cave, and the night things would come rushing in."

She nodded, knowing he was perfectly right. "Stalemate, is it? Okay, Jim Skeel. But if we never get out of here, I shall kill you at the very last moment. I'll never let those night beasts deprive me of the pleasure."

Skeel grinned. She was getting her nerve back again! The more he saw of this girl, the more he liked her. He liked the determined curve of her orchid-pale chin, the tight slash of her lips and the courage that gleamed behind a false hardness in her eyes. He shrugged. "Four more hours of oxygen. I suggest you regulate the flow to two-thirds and breathe shallowly. That'll give you a few hours more," he spoke quietly.

"No. If I can't find a way out of here in four hours— Well, I won't sit here and wait for the end. I'm going to explore. Coming?"

"I guess so," Skeel agreed. "Not that I think we'll find an-

other exit, for we won't. But walking helps me to think, and I know there must be a way out of this!"

CHAPTER IV

They walked side by side in silence, entered joining tunnels and adjacent caves but were careful to remember the way back. Everywhere the walls were lighted by the button-creatures but nowhere was there an exit to the outside. Not that it would do them any good. They both realized that now. The night horrors would be out there everywhere, waiting for new victims.

"You said walking helped you to think," she said dully. "Are you thinking?"

"Yes."

"What about?"

HE stopped, turned suddenly to face her. She was startled by a new, perplexed look on his face.

"I've been thinking things over from the beginning," Skeel said gruffly. "You say you came out here to kill me. 'You've had plenty of chance.'"

"But I didn't, and you can't understand it. There is a code, after all. I understand now what Commander Anders meant." She spoke softly, almost to herself. They walked in silence for a minute; then she added as an afterthought:

"You had your chance, too. Back there when I fainted—"

"Do you think," Skeel almost snarled, "I'd fire an electro-beam here in the caves, where these light-creatures mean our very lives?"

"There are other ways." She looked steadily at him. "You might have opened all my oxygen tanks."

"Didn't think of it." He turned his face away abruptly. "Quit bothering me; I'm still trying to think."

"You can think later." She was insistent. "Tell me one thing, Skeel. What made you turn killer? You once had the best record in the Patrol!"

"I'm still the best man in the Patrol!"

"No you're not, Skeel."

"Damn you, I—" He stopped. Then in a voice scarcely audible: "I have a reason. I've never told my story to anyone."

"You almost told Anders. I was in his office that day."

"Anders is a fool!"

"I'd like you to tell me." There was a way she said it, a certain tone in her voice that hinted of feeling. Perhaps even, of understanding.

HE was suddenly speaking, pouring out his story in a fierce rush of words as if he wanted to finish before that awful throbbing pain came again.

"It was in the early days when the Mars mines were opening. Lawless, bloody days. The Patrol received news that a freighter was being looted just a few hours from Earth. We got out there fast—too fast. Sixteen of us. The pirates hadn't yet left the drifting hulk. We walked into an ambush, and there was nothing to do but give up without a struggle. They removed our weapons, then without warning began burning us down with electros. I dropped and played dead, while all about me my friends were really dying! It was all over in seconds, but I can still hear their dying screams and the hiss of the electros.

"I think something snapped inside of me. I was in a mental hospital for days. When I came out, I swore a terrible oath. I swore to avenge my fifteen friends, to the last man! Any criminal would serve the purpose. There was a bitter hatred in me for all of them. I guess you know the rest. Since then I've always worked alone, and I've never given any criminal quarter. I've killed, yes. Fourteen times. I've almost reached my goal!"

He stopped, and her eyes were steadily upon him. "But will that be the end, Jim Skeel?"

He didn't answer.

"I remember something Anders said that day—"

"I remember it too!" he whispered. "God knows I remember,

and it's haunted me ever since. He said any normal man would squirm at the thing I'd done! Your brother, Miss Miller—he was innocent—but God help me, I feel no remorse! For the very first time, this thing frightens me!"

He expected her to answer—to say something, anything—but she was silent. For a long time Skeel sat motionless on the floor of the cave, fists pressed hard against his helmet.

Nadia glanced up at the little dial above her eyes, inside the the oxygen helmet. "Less than three hours now," she announced.

Skeel rose to his feet. "Come on," he said calmly. "I know the way out now."

"Out of these caves, do you mean?" Again her eyes were upon him steadily, those blue eyes that held something less than a crystal hardness now.

Skeel looked away. "Yes," he said. "Yes, that's what I mean."

They walked back to the cave entrance where the darkness surged in. But Skeel stopped just short of it. Approaching the cave wall, he touched one of the button-creatures. Instantly its light went out. Slowly, gingerly he detached it from the wall. It was rather gelatinous, he noticed, but was equipped with tiny, barely discernible sucker-cups.

Holding the grayish thing in his hand, Skeel approached Nadia and reached out toward her space-suited figure. She shrank back with a little shudder of loathing.

"Hold still!" Skeel demanded. "It's not going to hurt you, and it may save your life!"

He placed it on her shoulder where it remained quiescent for about ten seconds. Then it changed into a little disk of light again, like a miniature beacon.

"You see, it works! I should have thought of this before. Walk around! Your natural stride."

Nadia walked. At her second step the thing blinked off. She waited until it came on again, then carefully tip-toed around the cave. This time the creature's light stayed on.

SKEEL nodded. "This isn't going to be fun, but it's the only way! We've got to plaster each other with those things until we become walking pillars of light! Then we'll tip-toe out through the darkness, through those slinking nightmare things until we reach my cruiser. It'll be an ordeal, agony. Think you can do it, Miller?"

She nodded, suppressing a shudder at the thought of those gelatinous blobs covering her body.

"All right," Skeel said. "You

go to work on me first. Place them on my arms, shoulders and torso. But cover every inch! The more light we have, the easier we'll get through those beasts out there."

She went to work, biting her lip every time she touched one of the light-creatures; but before she was through, she had overcome her repugnance. Skeel was soon bathed in a brilliant white halo from the waist up.

"I think I know the secret of these things," Skeel said as he busied himself decorating her. They must come out onto the surface when the sun is there. They store up enough light energy to last them through the dark period. Somehow they assimilate the heat energy. This is cold light." As a finishing touch he placed some of the things in a little crown of light around her helmet.

"Now for the real test," he pronounced grimly. "We'll walk side by side. Don't get nervous, Miller, and above all walk *slowly*, on tip-toe. If these things go out, it's our finish!"

Like figures in a slow-motion film they moved across the cave toward the outer darkness.

Immediately they knew it was going to be a nightmare of agony. The wall of night seemed to flutter before them and then recede. Receding with the darkness, too, were half-seen grayish

shapes close to the ground. But behind and all around them the darkness closed in again. The night creatures closed in too, staying just beyond the little circle of light.

Their tentacles were long and sensitive and reached in close to the ground where the light hardly shone. One of them whipped against Skeel's ankles, and he felt the strength of it. He heard Nadia gasp and knew the same thing had happened to her. But they didn't stop in their slow, tip-toeing stride.

"Steady!" he warned. "Once we get outside, maybe they won't be so thick."

IN a few minutes that seemed like hours, they were outside and could see the glint of stars against a cobalt sky. They paused to rest. Their eyes were becoming used to the dark and they could see hordes of the grayish night things surging in toward them.

"Afraid I was wrong," Skeel murmured. "They're worse out here."

"Just so they keep their distance," Nadia shuddered. "If they come any closer, I—I might get panicky and run for it."

"You'd never make it," he warned. They moved on, careful step by step, pushing the darkness back. They made nearly half the distance before their tired

muscles forced them to rest again. The surging shapes seemed to be getting bolder. Skeel could feel them all around his feet now. He had to fight the impulse to run, to kick out at them, anything to keep them away. Instead, he bent slowly, reaching out with his blazing arms. The shapes retreated momentarily.

"Afraid we'd better not rest any more," he said. "Come on, we'll try to make it to the cruiser this time." They could see the dark, looming shape of it perhaps a hundred yards away. It seemed like a hundred miles.

Once his left arm bumped into her. Every light-creature on that side blinked off. In about ten seconds they came on again, as he held his arm motionless. He moved a little away, turned his head and looked at her. She was staring straight ahead. He saw her profile beneath the little halo of light around her helmet; that light enhanced every taut little muscle in her face, and Skeel suddenly realized her face was never meant to be drawn up into such a tight, grim mask. She was going along on raw nerve again. Skeel swore softly beneath his breath, marveling at her.

STRANGE, too, how swiftly and clearly he could think in all this nightmare slowness and

blackness. He had never seen things so clearly before. Never—

His mind came back abruptly as something whipped around his ankles. His feet seemed caught in a net of lashing, spiked tentacles! Slowly, with some effort, he managed to disentangle himself. He took another step forward. His foot came down on something soft and squirmy which lashed up at him. He took a hasty step backward, lost his footing and fell prone in utter darkness as every light-button on him blinked out.

For a single horrified instant Nadia stood there, despite the tentacles moving around her own feet.

"Keep going!" Skeel grated from the darkness where he lay. "You can make it now; don't mind me!"

But she didn't move, except to lean far over in Skeel's direction. Slowly she lowered herself, so that her entire light-glowing body almost covered his. All the buttons on her right arm blinked out as her hand touched the ground with a slight jar. She prayed that the pounding of her heart wouldn't cause the others to go out! Tensely she propped herself there, scarcely breathing, watching the dim lashing horrors. A dozen tentacles seemed to come from one central body. At the end of each tentacle was a bulbous thing with wiry, waving

antennae, and below the antennae were gaping slashes that opened and closed and might have been lips.

With sickening horror she saw some of the bulbous things pounding at Skeel's face-plate. Others tore at his fabricoid suit. Slowly she shifted her weight, brought her left arm around and moved it toward them. The things retreated from the light slowly. Seconds later Skeel's own light-buttons began flashing on, and he rose gingerly to his feet.

His face was white. For a moment he stood quite still and stared at her. "That does it," he muttered, but she didn't know what he meant. Carefully now she forged her way ahead. Skeel moved too, ever more slowly, staying always behind her.

THE cruiser was scarcely fifty feet ahead, and she had almost reached it. It was now or never, Skeel knew. She would gain the cruiser and blast back to Ceres Base. He had told her his story, confessed to being a killer—the killer of fourteen men! She would take that story back to Ceres Base, and they would believe her. There was only one thing to do.

Her voice came to him just then. "Hurry! I think you can run and make it now!"

"No, there's not any hurry. Not now, Miller."

She must have detected some strange note in his voice. She looked back just as he was drawing the electro from his belt. Carefully he raised his arm in a straight line.

Skeel saw the sudden startled look on her white face. He saw her mouth open, but she did not have time to speak.

"I guess this is it, Miller! Number fifteen!" He pulled the trigger, and the electro hissed its flame.

* * *

The men at Ceres Base stood in excited little groups near the dome air-lock. Every eye was on the gigantic V-panel reflecting the tiny speck that far out in space was curving in toward them. A solo cruiser, yes—but which one? The black one the girl had used? Or was this Skeel returning from another of his murderous missions? Every man there knew about the plot by now.

Anders stood there now, his face a picture of conflicting emotions. A thousand times he had blamed himself for allowing Nadia Miller to go out on that crazy mission! He had lived through a thousand agonies of waiting.

The dot grew larger in the Visipanel and resolved at last into the bluish-silver cruiser of the Space Patrol. Anders' face went suddenly white; then a fever of fury burned through him.

If this was Skeel—If Nadia didn't come back—

Minutes later the blue and silver cruiser neared the dome. The lock automatically opened. It swept gracefully in, and powerful magniplates brought it to rest. A figure climbed wearily out and walked toward the men.

"Nadia!" Anders cried, and leaped forward eagerly to help her out of the space suit. "Are you all right? What about Skeel?"

SHE smiled at him. "Jim Skeel won't come back." Quickly she related the story of the caves and the light-button creatures and their perilous path through the night beasts toward the cruiser.

"Skeel was a changed man in those final minutes," she explained. "He must have known what he was going to do—what he had to do. It was all so deliberate. I had almost reached the cruiser, not realizing he was so far behind me. I turned just in time to see him raise the weapon. He called, 'Number fifteen!' Then he fired."

"Fired at you?" Anders was puzzled.

"No. I thought he meant to. But the beam didn't come within twenty feet of me. He merely

fired at random, and instantly all the light-things on him went out. Then I—I could see those horrible night beasts rushing in—from all sides—waves of them—" She buried her face in her hands, trying to shut out the memory.

"The electro-beam," Anders said musingly. "Yes, that would do it. You fire one of those pistols, especially at full power, and it sends a slight electric shock all through you. But Skeel would have known that! Why did he do it? If it was to save you, now, I might understand; but you say you had already gained the ship—"

"To save me?" Nadia murmured. "No. I think it was to save himself."

Anders still looked a little puzzled. "But what about your brother? Did Skeel confess anything?"

She looked up and her eyes were shining, but she was not crying. Within her was only a vast, singing quiet too deep for tears.

"My brother, Commander? When you enter that case into the records, you might say—you may say, Commander, that my brother was killed when he fell off a cliff."

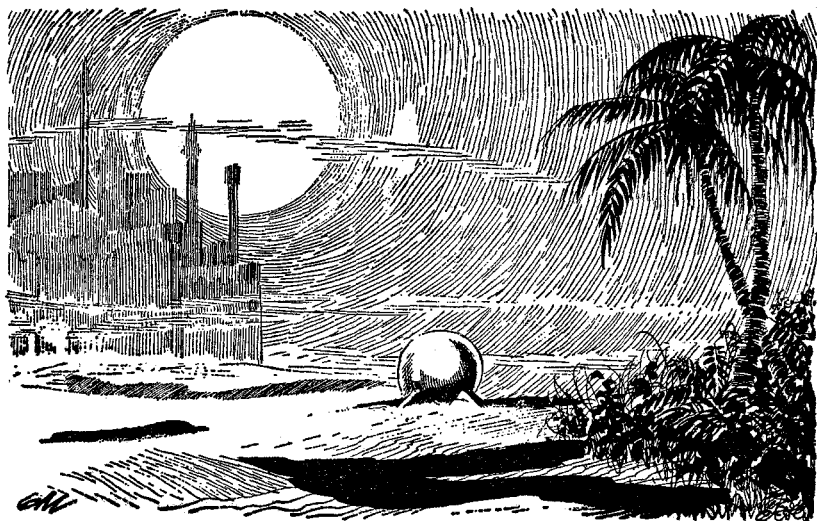
THE END

. . . A time-sled . . . a ring with the Seal of Solomon . . . a broken coaxial cable . . . a beautiful girl and a simple VIPPnaper—author Young wraps them up together in a confection of fantasy-cum-science-fiction. Let us all fly away together to

The City of Brass

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrated by MORROW



TO see her reclining there on the Sultan's couch, her left arm resting on the cushioned back, her bloomed legs drawn up beneath her, you'd never dream she was an animannikin. To Billings, Marcus N., who had come to the animuseum expressly to view the *The Thousand and One Nights* exhibit, she was Shahrazad herself, and he couldn't take his eyes away from her lovely heart-shaped face. Nor could he still the stepped-up cadence of his heart.

The Sultan's quarters were authentic down to the last detail. In the background, slender columns supported graceful round-arches; a period-piece oil-lump hung from the ceiling on burnished brass chains; and the rich and colorful tapestries that flanked the couch were drawn back by special-made draw-cords appended with large golden tassels.

The Sultan "himself" was authentic also. His black beard had a bluish cast, and the overflow from the blood-red silk sash wrapped around his waist trailed vividly across his lap. The crown encircling his head, down almost to his ears, was genuine silver. But then, there was no excuse for an animannikin not to be authentic. Big Pygmalion—the electronic device that copied famous figures out of the past—duplicated everything except living tissue, and in the case of living

tissue the substitute Big Pygmalion employed was indistinguishable from the real thing.

As hidden speakers dispensed subdued strains from Rimski-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, Shahrazad began the recitation of "The Story of the Porter and The Ladies of Baghdad, and of The Three Royal Mendicants." Billings listened raptly to her words, and the golden petals of her voice fell all around him. Behind and on either side of him, other people who had come that afternoon to view the *The Thousand and One Nights* exhibit pressed against him, imprisoning him between them and the velvet cord that separated the exhibit from the animuseum floor. He was unaware of their existence.

"There was a man from the city of Baghdad, who was unmarried, and he was a porter; and one day, as he sat in the market, reclining against his crate, there accosted him a female wrapped in an izar of the manufacture of El Mosil. . . ."

Yes, yes, Shahrazad, Billings "said," I remember that "night" well. You started to tell it to me once before—remember? And I'll never forget the lady with the striking eyes, "with lids bordered by long lashes, exhibiting a tender expression, and features of perfect beauty"—the lady who was lovely enough, almost, to have been yourself.

Your *real* self, Shahrazad. Not your animannikin self. Although you were like a doll even to begin with. A living, breathing doll. A doll that could have been mine—that *would* be mine—if it hadn't been for the immutable laws of time. If it hadn't been for the bluebeard Sultan of WayBack-When. Show me your ring, Shahrazad—I note that you have it on. That wonderful ring of yours with its Suleyman's seal that the Jinn so much abhor. And show me your lovely smile. Raise those lovely lashes of yours that I may witness once again the violet miracle of your eyes. Breathe upon me, and give me life—the life you knew in those fantastic days of memluks and sheykhs and wezirs; of Jinn and Jinniyehs and 'Efrits. Give me life, Shahrazad, so that once again I will want to go on living.

Officially it is believed that you have only a thousand and one nights in your repertoire. But I know better, Shahrazad. Actually, you have a thousand and two. And the thousandth and second is my favorite one of all—

There was once a man named Billings, who was unmarried, and he was a time traveler who worked for Animannikins, Inc., and who returned regularly to the lands of WayBackWhen and abducted Very Important Past Persons and brought them back to the future so that Big Pyg-

malion, the Electronic Sorcerer, could make facsimiles that walked and talked and laughed and cried just like the real thing; and then, one day, this VIPPnaper returned to the days of musk and aloeswood and willow-flower water, of 'Efrits and Jinniyehs and Jinn, of sultans and seraglios and wezirs' daughters . . . and fell in love. . . .

1.

THE seraglio had two guards—big black eunuchs clad in diaper-like loincloths and armed with yard-long scimitars. One was posted some distance down the corridor from the curtained doorway through which the girl had passed a little while ago, the other was stationed by the doorway itself. Billings, Marcus N., wearing a synthi-fiber melwatah that came all the way to the floor and a synthi-fiber turban that kept coming unwound, peered round the column behind which he had been biding his time till the girl had a chance to fall asleep. Satisfied that the time was ripe, he leveled the icer sewn into the lining of his right sleeve, flicked his wrist against the sensitive activator, and turned the first guard into a human icicle. Then, synthi-fiber slippers soundless on the carpeted floor, he advanced down the corridor toward guard no. 2.

Thus far, he hadn't found it

necessary to show his hand, but now he had no choice. Icers—the only modern weapon VIPPnappers were permitted to take with them—were accurate only at short ranges, and beyond a distance of ten or twelve feet it was virtually impossible to hit anything smaller than a barn door with them. Even as it was, Billings covered half the yardage to the doorway before the eunuch noticed him. Promptly, the man drew his scimitar and made several blood-curdling passes with it; but Billings, knowing that it would be useless to try to fake a reason for being in a place that was off-limits to all bona fide males except the Sultan himself, kept right on advancing, the muzzle of the icer directed at the eunuch's chest.

"Know, whoever thou may be and whencesoever thou comest," the eunuch called out, "that I am going to disembowel thee if thou come one step closer, and throw thy entrails to the dogs!"

BILLINGS increased his pace, prayerful of getting within range before the man sounded an alarm. His luck held, and the eunuch, apparently believing himself capable of handling the intruder alone, stepped grimly in front of the doorway and drew back his scimitar in the first phase of a swing that, had it been completed, would have sliced Bill-

ings in two. But before such a dire event could come to pass, Billings cut loose with the icer at a distance of three paces, and the eunuch turned into a quick-frozen statue, dropped his scimitar, and toppled to the carpeted floor.

Stepping over him, Billings parted the curtains and entered the seraglio proper. He felt sorry for the two guards, not so much because of the agony they would undergo while they were thawing out but because of the third degree to which the Sultan (who had been VIPPnaped a week ago by another Animannikins, Inc., VIPPnaper) would subject them when Shahrazad turned up missing in the morning; but a job was a job, and it was Billings' job to abduct the once-legendary raconteur of *The Thousand and One Nights*, and he intended to go through with it regardless of how many human icicles he had to leave behind him.

He wasn't *really* going to abduct her, of course—he was just going to borrow her for the eight or nine hours that it would take to duplicate her. And thanks to Big Pygmalion's proficiency in the art of memory-eradication, she wouldn't even have any recollection of the experience. Once duplicated, she would be handed over to Animannikins, Inc.'s "Lost and Found Department" and returned to the seraglio, and no harm would have been done,

either to her, or to the existent scheme of things, which, while it was indifferent to the permanent disappearance of an Unimportant Past Person, could be depended upon to create a cosmic upheaval over the permanent disappearance of a Very Important Past Person. Since the birth of Big Pygmalion ten years ago, VIPNapping had been perfected to the nth degree; and if it hadn't been for the fact that the time a person spent in the past or in the present was automatically added on to the opposite end of the line, even the minor disruptions sometimes occasioned by the temporary disappearances of VIPPs would no longer have been a factor.

Just within the seraglio doorway there was a luxurious couch, and on it, indistinctly illuminated by the gray dawnlight that was coming through a nearby window, lay the figure of a girl. Apparently the recitation of the most recent night—the thirty-second, according to Animannikins, Inc.'s Research Department—had exhausted her, for she had gone to bed with her clothes on; or perhaps it was customary for a ninth-century Arabian damsel to sleep in a turban, a jubbeh, and a pair of ankle-length bloomers. In any case, their presence on the damsel in question obviated any need for him to enter either of the two rooms that

flanked the present one, for the girl he had followed at a distance from the Sultan's quarters had been wearing identical apparel. There wasn't any need for him to explore further anyway, as the Sultan—at least in this phase of his marital career—was a monogamist. Hence, without further delay Billings pulled a somnosponge from the folds of his melwatah, clamped it over the girl's nose and mouth, and, when she awoke and began to struggle, held her firmly in place till the somno took hold. Then he removed the sponge, felt under the couch for her slippers, and, when he found them, slipped them on her feet. Finally, he slung her over his right shoulder and left



the room by the same door through which he had entered.

AND right then and there, his luck gave out; for just as he stepped into the corridor, he saw the Sultan step into it at the farther end.

Simultaneously, the Sultan saw him.

Billings, who despised Bluebeards of all eras and all nationalities, would have liked nothing better than to have turned this particular one into an icicle. But the distance was much too great; and even as the temptation touched him, the Sultan started shouting at the top of his voice—to his guards, to his memlukes, to his black slaves, to his wezir, to the nearest wali, and to the world at large. So Billings, having previously ascertained that the corridor was a dead end, took the only course left to him: he re-entered the room he had just left, made a beeline for the window, climbed up on the sill, and jumped into the dawnlit courtyard below—a drop of about twelve feet.

It was a calculated risk at best, but even so he would have come through unhurt if he hadn't underestimated the girl's weight. Landing considerably larder than he'd expected to, he sprained his right ankle—not severely enough to put him out of action, but severely enough to

make walking an ordeal and running an impossibility. However, with a little luck he could still cover the two hundred yards that separated him from the little grove of date palms where his time-sled was hidden, and he set out grimly, grimacing at every other step and tripping over the hem of his melwatah at every other one. The whole palace was awake by this time, and memlukes brandishing scimitars and black slaves carrying daggers were running this way and that. In addition, about ten thousand dogs had appeared out of nowhere and were yapping around his ankles. To make matters worse, the somno dose he had administered to his captive wore off, and she began to kick and squirm and scream. Some of the things she said made his ears burn, and he almost wished he hadn't gone to the trouble of sleep-teaching himself ninth-century Arabic.

THE memlukes and the black slaves began charging him in twos and threes and fours. He iced them down indiscriminately, and the courtyard gradually took on the aspect of a statuary shop that a strong wind had just blown through. No question about it, when the Hunter of the East caught the Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light, he was going to have a king-size defrost-

ing job on his hands. But that was all right: by then, Billings and his captive would be long gone, and no permanent damage would have been done.

Reaching the grove, he stepped among the trees and peered into the shadows in search of his time-sled. Presently, he saw it. It looked more like a toboggan than it did a sled—a toboggan featuring a chrome-filigreed control panel just behind its turned-up nose, and a foam-rubber padded pilot's seat that in addition to its regular duties functioned as a combination tool chest and supply locker. But Billings didn't care what it looked like. All he cared about was that it was still there. Climbing aboard, he plumped his captive on the seat and sat down beside her; then, holding her in a one-arm bear hug, he shoed away the dogs, and leaned forward and punched H-O-V-E-R 8-5 on the Intra-Era A.P.

Promptly, the little craft lifted aloft, automatically avoiding the fronds of the date palms, and came to a smooth stop eighty-five feet above the Sultan's courtyard.

JUST as promptly, the girl ceased kicking and squirming and screaming, and, turning toward him, fixed him with a pair of the most remarkable eyes he had ever seen. "Why did you not

impart to me that you had come to bear me away from this wicked place on your magic carpet, master?" she cried, in a voice that made him think of liquid gold. "Why did you not say that you were the deliverer for whom I have prayed, lo, these many months? I would have come with thee willingly—nay, gladly."

Billings hadn't the slightest idea what she was talking about, but he saw no point in arguing with providence. One of her slippers had come off and was caught in the folds of his melwatah. He disengaged it, and handed it to her. Surrounding her was an aura compounded of ambergris, musk, and aloeswood, which he identified presently as nedd, a perfume that was as popular in her day and age as *Jeu de Printemps*, *numéro cinq*, was in his. Ignoring the shouts and the imprecations arising from the courtyard below, he watched her put the slipper on. The Hunter of the East hadn't thrown his Noose yet, but the dawnlight had brightened to a considerable degree, and he could see her quite clearly. By twenty-second century standards, she was on the plump side, and her loose-fitting jubbeh and her baggy bloomers made her seem more so. But she was built for all that, and could have more than held her own in the best

garden of girls the twenty-second century could put together, or the twenty-first century, for that matter; or, for that matter, any other century. Her night-black hair fell slightly below her shoulders, and her turban, although no doubt carefully wound, had an impromptu air about it, possibly because the final several feet of the material had been allowed to escape from the turban proper and trail down to her right shoulder and thence down her back. Her feet were small, and so were her hands, and on the forefinger of the right one there was an enormous seal ring.

Presently, she turned and faced him again, and he replenished his first good glimpse of her with a long look. Her heart-shaped face was full, and her eyes, in defiance of the laws of genetics, were pure violet in hue. They were also large, and wide apart, and, in conjunction with her delicate nose and rather small mouth, enhanced the fullness of her face. Tiny pendants hung from golden circlets in her earlobes, which—so help him God!—were a rose-petal pink, and the lapels of her jubbeh were joined together by two sequined flaps in such a way as to leave her chest exposed all the way down to the tops of her bloomers, which, while they exceeded the function of ordinary bloomers

and covered her breasts, did so with but little room to spare.

Billings had never seen anyone quite like her in all his life. Talk about living dolls! It was difficult—no, impossible—to believe that the only reason her master didn't behead her was because of the Arabian cliff-hangers she recounted to him each night; yet, according to legend—or rather, according to history, the legend in question having been substantiated as fact some time ago—the only reason the Sultan allowed her to go on living was that he himself couldn't bear to go on living without learning how the tales she left unfinished each night came out.

"You are Shahrazad, aren't you?" Billings asked. "You must be."

SHE blinked once, as though the question had affronted her, and before she answered she looked straight into his eyes for several moments. "Yes, master—I am Shahrazad," she said. She hesitated, then, "And thou—art thou not the deliverer for whom I have prayed—a prince from a far land who has come to free me forever from my bondage and to bear me away to his palace on his magic carpet?"

Billings got the picture then. To her, he was an *Arabian Nights* version of a knight in shining armor—a young Lochin-

var who had come out of the west, and through all the wide Border his magic carpet was the best. He didn't blame the poor kid for wanting to get away from old Bluebeard, and he wished he could free her from the man permanently. He couldn't, of course, but that didn't mean he couldn't take advantage of her schoolgirl romanticism. "I have indeed come to bear you away, Shahrazad," he said, and leaned forward and began to punch P-R-E-S-E-N-T on the Trans-Era A.P.

He got as far as R. Then his right ankle, which he had momentarily forgotten, informed him that in leaning forward he had further outraged its already outraged cartilage. His reaction was as disastrous as it was instinctive: in straightening his leg to relieve the pain, he kicked the coaxial cable that led from the Trans-Era A.P. to the powerpac just below the foredeck, aggravating the ankle further and tearing the cable part away from its moorings. There was a jar, a lurch, and a brief period of darkness; then dawn again, and a strange new landscape.

Looking at the landscape through his pain, Billings knew that it didn't belong in the ninth century. It didn't belong in the twenty-second century either.

He wasn't even certain that it belonged on Earth.

2.

The 'Efrit

DIRECTLY below the sled, where a moment before the Sultan's courtyard had been, was an oasis. But it was like no oasis Billings had ever seen. It had been laid out in the form of a perfect circle. The palm trees that constituted ninety percent of its verdure also grew in perfect circles, and the circles became progressively smaller, the innermost one ringing a palm tree much larger than the others that stood in the exact center of the oasis something in the manner of a May pole.

Surrounding the oasis was a vast desert, and dotting the desert as far as he could see were other, identical oases. In the foreground was a small sapphire lake, and beyond the lake stood a walled city. Despite the imminence of sunrise, the city, with the exception of a lofty tower that rose above the eastern edge, appeared to be shrouded in darkness. Not utter darkness, but a fuliginous variety through which block-like multi-windowed buildings could be glimpsed. The wall itself was uncompromisingly black, and the tower and the buildings were constructed of a substance that strongly resembled brass, and could very well be just that.

Beyond the city sat a huge sphere apparently made of a sim-

ilar, if not identical substance, its surface unbroken save for a round aperture in its "equatorial" region, from which a long ramp extended to the ground.

Not a single human being—or any other kind of being—was in evidence anywhere.

Billings glanced at Shahrazad to see how the abrupt change of scene had affected her. She was staring at the city, violet eyes sparkling with excitement. He had expected her to be upset, but she looked for all the world like a little girl who had suddenly been transported to an *Arabian Nights* version of the Land of Oz.

Next, he looked at the Trans-Era A.P. cable to see how much damage had been done. Two strands still connected it to the power-pac, but all the others had pulled completely free. Such a complex reconnecting job would have taxed the ability of a very good time-sled repairman, and Billings wasn't even a good one. Insofar as the sled was concerned, he could kiss the twenty-second century good by.

The sun was beginning to rise, and he was relieved to see that it was rising in about the right place. But its light didn't seem quite right. There was a reddish cast to it, and it wasn't quite as bright as it should have been. Stealing a swift glance at the sun itself, he saw that it, too, had a reddish cast.

He swallowed. Was he still in the same solar system? The only alternative to such a conclusion was to conclude that the sled had somehow leaped into the remote future and emerged in an era when the sun was beginning to show the first symptoms of incipient old age. But since time-sleds couldn't travel into the future except with respect to past eras, such a conclusion was preposterous.

At first thought, it seemed equally as preposterous to conclude that the sled had somehow traveled through space and emerged in a different system. But not on second thought. Modern theory had it that space-time warped back upon itself in the manner of a Mobius strip. Assuming that the theory was correct—and there was no reason to believe otherwise—a time-sled, when it moved in time, moved in space as well; and as space, in a cosmic sense, certainly wasn't limited to a single solar system, a malfunction—conceivably at least—could shunt the sled into a different system. Or maybe into a different universe.

HE would see when the stars came out that night. And when and if the moon rose.

He became aware that Shahrazad was tugging the sleeve of his melwatah. "Look, master," she said, pointing across the lake.

"A Jinni!"

Billings looked. All he saw was what appeared to be a rotating pillar of dust. He said as much. "But how can dust swirl when there is no wind, master?" Shahrazad asked. "It is a Jinni, and a very powerful one. An 'Ef-rit—perhaps even a Marid."

Now that he thought of it, there wasn't any wind; there wasn't even a breeze. Moreover, the pillar, after pirouetting down to the water's edge, had begun to move across the lake in the direction of the hovering sled. Concluding that whatever it was, it would be the better part of valor to get out of its path, Billings put the undamaged Intra-Era controls on manual, turned the sled around, and headed for an oasis about a mile distant. Arriving above it, he brought the little craft down on the perimeter of grass bordering the outermost circle of trees; then he turned to Shahrazad, ready with the words of reassurance that he felt were in order after such trans-ninth-century proceedings.

HE did not utter them. She needed to be reassured about as much as her lord and master the Sultan needed to go on relief. Her face was radiant, and her violet eyes were filled with rapture. "Let us fly some more, master!" she cried. "Let us fly all the way to the top of the sky!"

He stared at her. "You can't *possibly* have ridden on one of these things before," he said.

"Oh, but I have dreamed of doing so many times, master, and that is almost the same. And I have read much of others flying, and that, too, is almost the same. Come, let us fly right up to the top of the sky!"

"Later," Billings said.

He continued to stare at her for some time. Then, shaking his head, he stepped gingerly down from the sled, found a spot where the grass was soft, and lowered himself to the ground. Pulling off his right slipper, he saw that his ankle was turning blue. At this point, Shahrazad, clearly unaware till now that he had hurt himself, came flying to his side. "You are injured, master!" she cried, and, before he could stop her, she tore a sizeable length of material from the loose portion of her turban and began bandaging the ankle so gently that he felt hardly anything at all.

She did an excellent job. Afterward, she forced the slipper back onto his foot and made him stand up. Putting his weight on his right foot, he found that the pain was much less acute, and a few tentative steps informed him that he could now walk without limping.

Shahrazad was as pleased as he was. "There is a spring just

within the trees," she said. "I can hear it bubbling. Shall we retire to it, O master, and refresh ourselves?"

Before accompanying her, he pulled down several low-hanging palm fronds and covered the time-sled with them, just in case. The spring turned out to be a stone-lined pool filled with the clearest water he had ever seen. He was dubious about drinking any of it, but he knew he was going to have to acclimate himself to this strange land sooner or later, and when Shahrazad cupped her hands and satisfied her thirst, he followed suit. Then they bathed their faces and sat back on an expanse of thick green grass which grew to a uniform height of approximately two and a half inches. Noticing a low-hanging cluster of fruit just above his head, Billings reached up and broke it free. It consisted of roseate spheres the size of honeydew melons, and to look at one of them was to want to devour it on the spot. Realizing by this time that the oases were orchards of some kind, he decided to take a chance, and he and Shahrazad had breakfast. The "melons" proved to be even more delicious than they looked, and their taste alone precluded the possibility of their being unfit for human consumption. Billings ate three of them, and Shahrazad ate two.

BREAKFAST over, Billings lay back on the sward, wondering how he was going to get back to the twenty-second century and the girls he had left behind (none of whom he missed particularly, but some of whom probably missed him). As he lay there wondering, Shahrazad leaned over him, removed his turban, which had become unwound again, and gave it several deft twists and tucks that transformed it into a headpiece fit for a king. Replacing it on his head, she said. "Shall I relate to thee a tale that will beguile thee, O master?" Without waiting for him to answer, she rushed on, "There was a man of the city of Baghdad, who was unmarried, and he was a porter; and one day, as he sat in the market, reclining against his crate, there accosted him a female wrapped in an izar of the manufacture of El-Mosil, composed of gold-embroidered silk, with a border of gold lace at each end, who raised her face-veil, and displayed beneath it a pair of black eyes, with lids bordered by long lashes, exhibiting a tender expression, and features of perfect beauty; and she said, with a sweet voice, 'Bring thy crate, and follow me.'

"The porter had scarcely heard her words when he—" Abruptly, Shahrazad paused, and raised her head. "Listen—do you hear it, master?"

Billings raised his head also. For a while, he could make out nothing. Then he heard a faint humming sound, and realized that it was growing louder by the second. He laughed, but not nearly as convincingly as he'd intended to. "It's the wind," he said. "What else can it be?"

"No, master—it is not the wind. It is a Jinni. The one we saw before, perhaps—or perhaps a different one."

"But if it's a Jinni, you should be afraid. Why aren't you?"

Her violet eyes went wide with indignation. "I—afraid of a Jinni, master? Indeed! It is the Jinn who are afraid of me!" Proudly, she pointed to the large ring on her right forefinger that he had noticed earlier. "This seal ring," she proclaimed in her rich golden voice, "is made of both brass and iron, and iron, as you yourself must know, master, is excessively dreaded by the Jinn. It is a most marvelous ring which I had wrought by a most excellent craftsman when I came to possess one of the lead stoppers which Suleyman Ibn Da'ud used to imprison the Jinn in brass bottles hundreds of years ago and upon which he imprinted his seal. Upon the brass are engraved Suleyman's commands to the good Jinn, none of which any longer remain; and upon the iron are engraved his commands to the bad Jinn—the Sheytans,

the 'Efrits, and the Marids. Also upon the ring is engraved the Most Great Name. With such a ring in my possession, O master, I have no cause to fear the Jinn—but the Jinn have cause to fear me!"

She held the ring under Billings' nose so that he could get a good look at the seal; but he was more interested in her face than he was in the talisman, and glanced at the latter only cursorily. So earnest was her expression and so zealous were her eyes that for a moment he half believed that what she had told him was based on fact instead of on folklore. Then he brought himself to time, and, getting to his feet, said, "I still say it's the wind, but we'll have a look anyway."

SHE accompanied him back the way they had come, and together they looked out over the desert from behind the outermost circle of trees. The humming sound was much louder now, and had taken on an eerie tone. Its source was the same pillar of dust they had seen before, or at least Billings assumed it was the same one. It was less than half a mile away, and he could make it out clearly. In color, it was dark-brown, verging in places on black, and he estimated its height at about twenty feet and its diameter at about three. The

course on which it was moving would take it past the oasis at a comfortable distance of several hundred yards, for which he was duly grateful. Jinni or not, the damned thing had him worried.

It didn't have Shahrazad worried, though. Indeed, from the way she was acting you'd have thought that the circus had just come to town and the elephants were on parade. "It is an 'Efrit, master," she said, "and it perceives that we are here. See—it is changing direction."

Sure enough, the pillar had altered its course. And there wasn't a chance of their reaching the time-sled in time to get away. Horrified, Billings watched the dark-brown swirling mass move right up to within thirty feet of the oasis and come to a stop. The humming sound faded away, and the dust—if dust it was—began to coalesce. Presently he discerned a pair of huge splayed feet and a pair of grapnel-like hands. At length he made out the head. It brought to mind a huge brass kettle turned upside down with a face sketched on it. And such a face! The eyes resembled rotating fan-wheels. The nose was broad, and slightly turned up. The Gargantuan mouth was open, revealing two rows of tombstone-like teeth. As Billings stared, the rows ground against each other, and several sparks shot forth.

HE directed the muzzle of his icer at the kettle-like head and put his free arm around Shahrazad. The fragrance of nedd rose round him, seemed to envelope him, and he found himself wishing he were twenty feet tall so he could do physical battle with the monster that threatened their lives. But he wasn't, of course, and when the 'Efrit came within range he would have to render it *hors de combat* the easy, twenty-second century, way. Apparently, however, coming within range was not on its agenda. After grinding its teeth once more, it backed off and commenced rotating again. The humming sound began anew, and rose on a cacophonous crescendo. The face disappeared; the head, the hands, the feet. At length, the pillar of dust took shape again, and swirled off in the direction from which it had come.

Billings stared after it. After a while he realized that his arm was still around Shahrazad's shoulders. He removed it somewhat reluctantly and sat down on a nearby log. Shahrazad sat down beside him, cheeks flushed with excitement, violet eyes aglow. "I am excessively glad, O master," she said, "that you chose to pass through the Veil on the way to your palace, for I have longed, lo, these many years, for an opportunity to avenge the persecutions which

my countrymen have suffered at the vile hands of the Jinn. Let us proceed at once to the City of Brass, that I may begin, as that is where they live."

The day had no end of surprises up its sleeve. "Do you actually know where we are?" he asked incredulously.

"Of course, master. We are in the land beyond the Veil. The land of the Jinn. I have never been here before, as it is beyond the power of ordinary mortals like myself to pass unaided from our land to this one, but when I saw the City of Brass, I suspected the truth, and when the 'Efrit came to spy on us, I knew. They are afraid, master, and we must take advantage of their fear and capture them in bottles of brass and throw them into the sea."

In her voice rang the zeal of a born crusader, and the seal ring on her finger had taken on an added luster. Looking at it, Billings was somehow reminded of Carry Nation's hatchet. He sighed. All he'd needed was to become involved in a one-woman jihad against the Jinn. "Suppose you tell me a little more about the Veil," he said. "Not," he added hastily, "that it is unknown to me. I'd merely like to have my memory replenished."

She needed no second invitation. "Very well, master, I will comply with thy wish. But I must begin at the beginning."

THE CITY OF BRASS

3.

The Veil

TO the dwelling of my father the Wezir there came one day when I was as yet quite young (said Shahrazad) a poor fisherman who, for a mere kataif, offered to my father a brass bottle which he had caught in his net and which was sealed with a lead stopper bearing the seal of our lord Suleyman. My father gave the poor man the pastry, and accepted the bottle in return, and afterwards placed it in a secluded part of the courtyard. Seeing it there the following morning, I approached it closely, and, lifting it, found it to be excessively heavy. Perceiving the seal, but not understanding its true nature, I obtained a kitchen knife from the cook-maid and picked at the lead until I extracted the stopper. Immediately, smoke came forth and ascended towards the sky, and spread over the face of the earth; at which I wondered excessively. And after a little while, the smoke collected together, and was condensed, and then became agitated and was converted into an 'Efrit, whose head was in the clouds, while its feet rested upon the ground. Its head was like a dome; its hands were like winnowing forks; and its legs, like masts. Its mouth resembled a cavern; its teeth were like stones; its nostrils, like trum-

pets; and its eyes, like lamps. And it had disheveled and dust-colored hair.

When I beheld this 'Efrit, the muscles of my sides quivered, and I was excessively afraid and knew not what to do. The 'Efrit, as soon as it perceived me, exclaimed, "There is no deity but God; Suleyman is the Prophet of God. O Prophet of God, slay me not; for I will never again oppose thee in word, or rebel against thee in deed!" "O Marid," said I, "dost thou say Suleyman is the Prophet of God? Suleyman hath been dead a thousand and seven hundred years; and we are now in the end of time. What is thy history, and what is thy tale, and what was the cause of thy entering this bottle?" When the Marid heard these words, it said, "There is no deity but God! Receive news, O damsel!" "Of what," I inquired, "dost thou bring me news?" The 'Efrit answered, "Of thy being instantly put to a most cruel death." "Wherefore wouldst thou kill me?" I asked, "and what requires thy killing me, when I have liberated thee from the bottle?" The 'Efrit answered, "Choose what kind of death thou wilt die, and in what manner thou shalt be killed." "What is my offense?" I asked. The 'Efrit replied, "Hear my story, O damsel." "Tell it then," said I, "and be short in thy words; for my

soul hath sunk down to my feet."

KNOW then," it said, "that I am one of the heretical Jinn. I rebelled against Suleyman the son of Da'ud; I and Sakhr the Jinni; and he sent to me his Wezir, Asaf the son of Barkhiya, who came upon me forcibly, and took me to him in bonds, and placed me before him. And when Suleyman saw me, he offered up a prayer for protection against me, and exhorted me to embrace the faith, and to submit to his authority; but I refused; upon which he called for this bottle, and confined me in it, and closed it upon me with the leaden stopper, which he stamped with the Most Great Name. He then gave orders to the good Jinn, who carried me away, and threw me into the midst of the sea. There I remained a hundred years; and I said in my heart, 'Whosoever shall liberate me, I shall enrich him forever'; but the hundred years passed over me, and no one liberated me, and I entered upon another hundred years; and I said, 'Whosoever shall liberate me, I will open to him the treasures of the earth'; but no one did so, and four hundred years more passed over me, and I said, 'Whosoever shall liberate me, I will perform for him three wants'; but still no one liberated me. I then fell into a violent rage, and said within myself, 'Whosoever

shall liberate me now, I will kill him; and only suffer him to choose in what manner he will die.' And lo, now thou hast liberated me, and I have given thee thy choice of the manner in which thou wilt die."

When I heard this story, I felt assured of my death, and I implored the 'Efrit, saying, "Pardon me by way of gratitude for my liberating thee." "Why," answered the 'Efrit, "I am not going to kill thee but for that very reason, because thou *hast* liberated me." "Then," said I within myself, "this is a Jinni, and I am a damsel; and God hath given me sound reason; therefore, I will now plot its destruction with my art and reason, like as it hath plotted with its cunning and perfidy." So I said to the 'Efrit, "Hast thou determined to kill me?" It answered, "Yes." Then said I, "By the Most Great Name engraved upon the seal of Suleyman Ibn-Da'ud, I will ask thee one question; and wilt thou answer it to me truly?" On hearing the mention of the Most Great Name engraved upon the seal of Suleyman, the 'Efrit was agitated, and trembled, and replied, "Yes; ask, and be brief." I then said, "How wast thou in this bottle? It will not contain thy hand or thy foot; how then can it contain thy whole body?" "Dost thou not believe that I was in it?" said the 'Efrit. I an-

swered, "I will never believe thee until I see thee in it." Upon this, the 'Efrit shook, and became converted into smoke, which rose to the sky and then became condensed, and entered the bottle by little and little, until it was all enclosed. Then I snatched the sealed leaden stopper, and, having replaced it in the mouth of the bottle, called out to the 'Efrit, and said, "Choose in what manner of death *thou* wilt die, for I will assuredly throw thee back into the midst of the sea." On hearing these words, the 'Efrit endeavored to escape; but could not, finding itself restrained by the impression of the seal of Suleyman, and thus imprisoned as the vilest and filthiest and least of 'Efrits. I then took the bottle to the brink of the sea, whereat the 'Efrit cried, "Nay! May!"; to which I answered, "Yea, without fail! Yea, without fail!" The Marid, then addressing me with a soft voice and humble manner, said, "What dost thou intend to do with me, O damsel?" I answered, "I will throw thee into the sea, and if thou hast been there these many days, I will make thee remain there until the hour of judgment. Did I not say to thee, 'Spare me, and so may God spare thee; and destroy me not, lest God destroy thee?' But thou didst reject my petition, and wouldst nothing but teachery; therefore God hath

caused thee to fall into my hand, and I have betrayed thee." "Open to me," cried the 'Efrit, "and for my freedom I will tell thee of the Veil which divideth the land of men from the land of Jinn and through which ordinary mortals cannot pass." "Thou wilt tell me first," said I, "and only then, if thou hast told me well and true, will I open the bottle and set thee free." "Very well," said the 'Efrit, and it spoke as follows:

K NOW, O damsel, that there lived near the city of El Maras a certain merchant, who possessed wealth and cattle, and had a wife and children; and God (whose name be exalted) had also endowed him with the knowledge of the languages of beasts and birds. The abode of this merchant was in the country; and he had in his stable an ass and a bull. Now, the bull envied the ass excessively, because the stall of the ass was much larger and much more luxuriously appointed than his own; and the bull, being proud, considered it unseemly for himself to sleep in such mean surroundings while the ass enjoyed each night the comforts of a king. Therefore the bull began sleeping in the ass's stall, taking up the lion's share of the space and using as his bed all of the straw which the stable slave spread daily upon the floor.

"Upon perceiving the conduct of the bull, the merchant was excessively angered, and ordered the stable slave to extend by five cubits the wall which divided the two stalls and which measured four cubits, so that the bull, whose tether measured only nine cubits, could not pass around it. The stable slave did as he was bidden, and extended the wall by five cubits; but the next morning he came running to the merchant and said to him, much agitated, 'Master, last night the bull leaped over the top of the wall and slept in the ass's stall as before, for there is an impression of a heavy body in the straw.' Upon hearing this, the merchant reprimanded the slave for being untruthful. 'Verily,' said he, 'the wall that separates the stalls is four cubits high, and no bull could accomplish such a feat.' But the stable slave implored him to come to the stable and see for himself, and the merchant, perceiving the poor man's agitation, agreed to do so; and lo, just as the stable slave had said, there in the straw of the ass's stall was a deep impression which only an excessively heavy beast such as the bull could have made.

"Upon observing this, the merchant was exceedingly perplexed, and said within himself, 'God (whose perfection be extolled) hath endowed me with the power

to understand the languages of beasts and birds, and I have taken it upon myself to divulge my ability to no one, either animal or man, believing it to be too sacred to be made known. Therefore I cannot divulge it now by asking this bull how he accomplished this marvelous feat.' So the merchant, as determined as before to protect the rights and the privacy of the ass, ordered the stable slave to heighten the wall between the stalls by six cubits, so that even were the bull able to make such a great leap, the length of his tether would prevent him from accomplishing it. The stable slave did as he was bidden, and heightened the wall by six cubits; but the next morning he came running to the merchant so excessively agitated that he could barely speak, and said, 'Master! Master! Last night the bull leaped the wall and slept beside the ass as before, for there is an impression of a heavy body in the straw.' The merchant, having heard these words, hurried to the stable, and saw that the stable slave had again spoken the truth: there in the straw of the ass's stall was a valley made by the heavy body of the bull. The merchant knew then that he could no longer hide his acquaintanceship with the languages of beasts and birds, and, dismissing the stable slave, proceeded at once to the stall of the bull. He

addressed himself to the animal as follows: 'Know, O wretched creature, that God (whose name be exalted) hath endowed me with the knowledge of the languages of beasts and birds, and know therefore that it is in his name that this question is asked: By what means wast thou able to leap a wall of ten cubits in height when thy tether measures but nine, and sleep the night in the stall of the ass?' Whereupon the bull, perceiving his master's agitation and trembling in the presence of one thus marvelously endowed by God, answered, 'Master, there are four ways—not merely three—to thwart the barrier of a wall and arrive at its other side: by passing around it, by passing in under it, by passing over it, and *by passing through it*. Know then, that since I could neither pass over this wall, nor in under it, nor over it, I chose the fourth way, and passed through it.'

UPON hearing these words, the merchant was excessively angered, and it was as though his resurrection took place. 'Why dost thou lie to me, O wretched animal?' he cried. 'Thou knowest as well as I that that which thou claim to have accomplished can be accomplished only by Jann, Jinn, Sheytans, 'Efrits, and Marids.' 'Nay, master,' said the bull, 'it can be accomplished by anyone

once the secret is known; and the secret is this: the wall must be passed through at a certain angle,' and the bull then moved forward, turned, and stepped obliquely into, and through, the wall; and then stepped back through it in a similar fashion into his own stall. The merchant was excessively impressed by this great marvel, and said to the bull, 'Verily, thou hast spoken the truth, and that which thou hast accomplished is marvelous indeed; therefore it is not fitting that a noble creature such as thou should live in quarters lowlier than a mere ass's.' And the merchant called the stable slave to him and directed him to make the bull's stall larger by two times and to spread upon its floor each day large quantities of fresh straw. And the bull was excessively pleased, and thereafter he was content to sleep in his own stall.

"And now, O damsel," continued the 'Efrit, "it remains but for thee to make the following likenesses to understand the Veil: The stall of the ass is the land of man and the stall of the bull is the land of the Jinn. The ass is mankind, and the bull is the Jinn; and the wall separating the two stalls is the Veil itself." And the 'Efrit then said, "Since I have fulfilled my part of the covenant, thou must fulfill thy

part. Liberate me, and I vow to thee that I will do thee no harm."

Upon this, I accepted the covenant, and when I had bound the 'Efrit by oaths and vows, and made it swear by the Most Great Name of God, I opened the bottle; and the smoke ascended until it had all come forth, and then collected together and became, as before, an 'Efrit of hideous form. The 'Efrit kicked the brass bottle into the sea, and went its way; and I took the sealed leaden stopper and returned to the dwelling of my father the Wezir; and afterward I had this ring made after the seal of Suleyman Ibn-Da'ud, which was on the stopper, knowing the power it would give me over the Jinn. But although I knew their secret, I was unable to reach their land until now.

And that, O master (Shahrazad concluded), is the story of the Veil.*

4.

The City of Brass

IT was some time before Billings could think of anything to say. He would have discounted Shahrazad's story altogether and imputed its source to the potpourri of folklore out of which she had already begun to fabricate the *Arabian Nights*, if it hadn't been for the irritating fact that he had seen a genuine

*"The Veil" is based on two tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Jinni with his own eyes. Granted, its existence—and the more-than-probable existence of others like it—didn't prove the existence of the Veil, but it certainly argued strongly in the Veil's favor; while the fact that he and Shahrazad had been somehow shunted through time and space to a different world in a fraction of a second made it difficult to gain-say that that world and the one they had left behind them existed side by side.

The sun was now approaching meridian, and as Billings' watch indicated 1122 hours, the conclusion could safely be drawn that the land of the Jinn had a time schedule similar to that of the land of man. Looking at the sphere, which he was certain was a spaceship, he wondered whether the Jinn had a technology similar to man's. Folklore made them out to be a rather naive lot whom King Solomon used to bottle by the score; but you couldn't set much store by folklore, and they might very well turn out to be technologically superior to man, in which case the City of Brass might provide him with a means of repairing his time-sled.

HIS mind made up, he turned to Shahrazad. "Tonight when the stars come out," he said, "you and I are going to visit the City of Brass."

She couldn't have been more

excited if she had been a little kid and he had told her he was going to take her to see Santa Claus. "O master, I can hardly wait!" she cried. Then she gave a little sigh. "If I only had some lead, and a means of melting it!"

He gave her a hard look. "Lead?"

"Yes. After I put the Jinn in bottles, I must seal the mouths and stamp the stoppers with the seal of Suleyman, or else they will be able to get out."

He stared at her. Up till now, he'd been able to take that silly talisman of hers in his stride, and to write off ninety percent of the claims she had made for it as harmless, superstitious nonsense. But now she was going too far, and it was high time someone acquainted her with a few of the scientific facts of life.

He opened his mouth to do so. Then he closed it again. She was looking at him as though he had made heaven and earth and could create the stars any time he wanted to. "It just so happens," he heard himself saying, "that I do have some lead, and a means of melting it. I'll get it for you and show you how, and afterwards I want you to be real quiet so that I can do some thinking. I've a great many things to figure out."

An ingot of lead and a small self-heating ladle were standard repair equipment for all time-

sleds. He got both items out of the tool chest and showed her how the ladle worked. She was so delighted that she leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth. He returned the lead and the ladle to the tool chest, no longer quite the same man; then he found a tree to his liking and sat down beneath it to think. Shahrazad sat down beside him, as quiet as a mouse. He was glad now that he hadn't divulged any of the scientific facts of life—not because she had kissed him but because faith such as hers was too precious a thing to destroy out of petty scientific self-righteousness. And if an ingot of lead and a self-heating ladle had a beneficial effect on her morale, he was damned if he was going to deny them to her.

When the stars came out that night, Billings almost wished they hadn't. For constellations do not lie, and the constellations that winked into formation above his head stated unequivocally that, instead of being shunted into a different star system as he had tentatively theorized, he and Shahrazad had been catapulted nearly 100,000 years into the future.

Owing to the different directions and velocities of its stellar components, the big dipper had transmuted to a graceful slipper; while Scorpio, for an identical reason, now looked like a three-

legged dog with a turned-up tail. Orion was unrecognizable, and Berenice's hair was a mess.

Even so, he didn't quite believe what the constellations said until the moon came up. She was substantially older than when he had known her, but she was undeniably the same heavenly body; and that being so, the planet on which he stood had to be the planet Earth.

The Veil, then—among unknown other things—represented nearly 100,000 years, and unless he could find a way of passing back through it he and Shahrazad were going to be stuck permanently in the far future; and even if he did manage to get through it, in all probability he would emerge in the same century he had left—the ninth—in which case he still wouldn't be able to get back to the twenty-second.

And even if the Trans-Era unit was still functioning, he couldn't bypass the Veil by returning to his own era the long way around, because the maximum range of the time-sled was 5,000 years.

Woe was him!

AND yet, he supposed, he was no worse off than he would have been if his tentative theory had turned out to be correct, and the time-sled had been shunted into a different star system. As matters stood, he and Shahrazad

could make a go of things if they had to. There was plenty of food and water available, and certainly the climate was amenable enough. As for the Jinn, from what he had seen of them thus far they should be duck soup for his icer. Icing one of them would be like seeding a cloud.

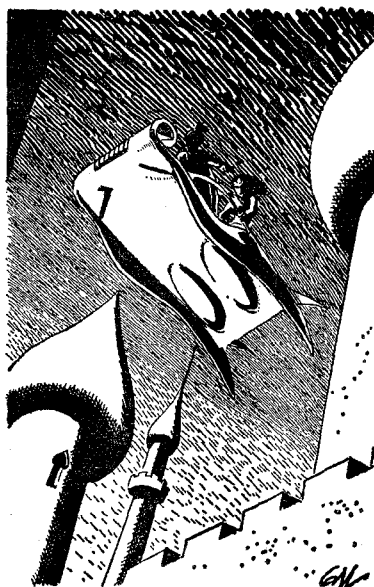
That's when the thought struck him. Down through the ages had man evolved into an overblown puff of smoke with a dome for a head, and did the Jinn constitute mankind circa 100,000 A.D.?

Preposterous!

Preposterous or not, unless the sphere turned out to be an alien spaceship, it was the only theory that fitted the facts.

But enough of makeshift theories. He was sick of them. He needed more facts to build with, and the City of Brass was the logical place to look for them. He turned to Shahrazad, wondering whether she had noticed the difference in the constellations. She was praying—for the fifth time that day and for the second time since sunset. Remembering that he was supposed to be a Muslim, he joined her in a few Zikrs; then, after they finished, they proceeded to the time-sled, removed its palm-frond camouflage, and climbed on board.

LIFTING high into the night sky, Billings approached the city at an altitude of three hun-



dred feet and at a speed of fifteen mph. Out over the lake they sailed, the anti-gravs making rippling footprints on the water. The tower, now that night had fallen, had the aspect of a huge lighthouse, for a bright bluish light emanated from its apex, illuminating the city along much the same lines as the darkness Billings had noticed that morning had shrouded it. The encompassing wall, so uncompromisingly black by daylight, now glowed with a fiery luminescence, and the city, far from being the night-infested metropolis he had hoped to find, was a virtual lake of light, while the tower loomed above it like a big brass bonfire.

Undaunted, he continued on

over the lake and passed high above the wall. Below lay block after block of unadorned box-shaped buildings and empty narrow streets. There was neither sound nor movement; there were no signs of people or vehicles, nor was there any sign of Jinn. For all the brightness of its light, the city was apparently dead.

He said as much to Shahrazad, but she would have no part of such an assumption. "Oh no, master," she said, "the Jinn are there somewhere. Probably they are hiding from us in abject fear."

Billings hoped she was right, but he knew she wasn't. He piloted the sled in the direction of the tower, and when they were above it, descended slowly to within several yards of its dome-like apex. The bluish light emanated from a horizontal slot at an angle that brought its radiance all the way to the farthest wall, and above the slot there was a reflector of some kind that relayed part of the light straight down and to either side so that the section of the city in the immediate vicinity of the tower could enjoy—or endure, as the case might be—the same all-pervasive illumination as the rest of the city. The city-side of the tower, therefore, could be ruled out insofar as a surreptitious approach was concerned.

Billings backed away from the light and began descending along

the opposite wall. Near the apex, there was a narrow aperture through which a dim light shone, but, hopeful of finding a means of entry close to the ground, he did not pause. The tower was conical in shape, and slanted gradually outward as he descended; but the wall—at least that section of it that lay in relative darkness—was broken by no more openings of any kind.

There was nothing for it, then, but to enter from the top. Returning to the aperture he had spurned a few moments ago, he moved in close to it and locked the sled on HOVER. The opening was little more than a vertical slot in the thick wall, but it would be wide enough for him to pass through sideways. Wondering whether the structure was really made out of brass as it appeared to be, he examined the wall at close range. No, the material wasn't brass—it was another kind of alloy. An alloy that resembled brass in appearance but which was comprised of far more durable metals than zinc, tin, and copper. What those metals might be, he had no idea; but he had a hunch that they weren't indigenous to Earth.

He turned to Shahrazad. "I'm going inside," he said, "and just in case I don't come back out, I'm going to show you how to make the magic carpet do your bidding. First of all—"

She was up in arms. "But master, it is I who have the ring—not you. Without it, you will be helpless against the Jinn. You must take me with you!"

BILLINGS patted the right sleeve of his melwatah. "I have a little talisman of my own," he said. Then, ignoring her continued protests, he showed her how to manipulate the three simple mechanisms that controlled the movements of the sled. "Now I want you to wait for me, of course," he went on, "but I don't want you to wait any longer than daybreak. If I'm not back by then, or if any danger threatens you in the meantime, I want you to leave, and to leave as fast as you can."

"But you must not go alone. You *must* not! Here, take my ring and thus insure thy safe return."

He shook his head and made her slip the ring back on her finger. The concern in her violet eyes touched him, and he leaned over and kissed her forehead. Again, the fragrance of nedd seemed to envelop him, but this time, far from wishing he were twenty feet tall, he wished he were the Sultan of WayBack-When. This would never do at all. Hastily, he drew away, and, without another look at her, stepped from the sled to the sill of the aperture and began edging

his way through the narrow opening.

IT gave into a large deserted chamber that was devoid of objects of any kind, save for a big brass bottle that was suspended from the ceiling, to a height of about five feet above the floor, on a trio of brass chains. The ceiling was so lofty that the place had more of the aspect of a closet than it did a room, but that was all right. Closets had doors as well as rooms did, and this one was no exception. Moreover, the door in question was ajar.

Making certain that no Jinn were lurking in any of the corners, Billings stepped down to the floor and walked across the chamber to the door. It was a good fifteen feet in height, and, judging from its thickness, must have weighed at least a quarter of a ton; but it swung inward easily enough when he opened it the rest of the way, and didn't emit so much as a single squeak. In common with the walls, the floor, and the ceiling—but not with the chains and the bottle, which were the real thing—it was made of the same brass-like alloy that constituted the tower's exterior.

Stepping through the doorway, he found himself on a semi-circular landing that, a few feet to the left, gave onto a downward winding ramp. Opposite him, a smooth brasslike wall, broken by

another enormous door, bisected the entire top section of the tower. The Jinn were no more in evidence here than in the chamber.

He became aware of an acrid odor, and realized that it had been present all along, and that he had been too tense to take conscious note of it. In a way, it reminded him of the stench electric wires give off when they are shorted.

He took conscious note of something else: the subdued light that he was seeing by had no visible source and seemed to be part of the air itself. Well, there was certainly nothing remarkable about that. Even as far back as the twenty-second century, ion-atmosphere penetration had been a common thing.

But if ion-atmosphere penetration was being used, what was the purpose of the bluish light emanating from the tower?

The source of that light, he was sure, lay beyond the wall on the other side of the landing. He went over and tried the door, but found it to be as unmovable as the wall itself.

Were there Jinn behind it? he wondered.

He decided to gamble that there were not, and, keeping his right forearm at right angles to his body so that his icer would be in position if he needed to use it in a hurry, he started down the ramp.

After leaving the landing, the ramp cut sharply to the left and thenceforth bordered the outer wall. The outer wall was featureless, but he hadn't proceeded a dozen yards before he came to a door on the inner wall. He tried it, and it swung inward to his touch. He peered cautiously into the chamber beyond. Except for the absence of an aperture, it was exactly like the one he had quitted a few minutes ago, and suspended from its ceiling on a trio of brass chains was a brass bottle identical to the one he had seen in the first chamber.

He was tempted to take the bottle down and see what was in it, but remembering Shahrazad sitting all alone on the time-sled way up in the sky, he decided to get on with his explorations without further delay so that he could get back to her as soon as possible.

The second door was the first of many, and apparently all of them were unfastened; but after trying three more and finding three more identical chambers, three more identical trios of brass chains, and three more identical brass bottles, he concluded that he was wasting his time, and desisted from opening any more.

AT length, the doors gave way to a smooth unbroken surface, and not long afterward the

ramp leveled out into a corridor, whose curve was almost imperceptible. He knew then that he had reached the base of the tower, and he proceeded with greater caution. Presently the corridor ended, and he found himself confronted by a huge door that made the others seem small by comparison but which proved to be no less co-operative. Shoving it open, he stepped watchfully into a huge chamber.

Huge? Vast was a much more appropriate adjective. The ceiling constituted the interior of an inner dome, and its apex was a full fifty feet above the floor. Suspended from the apex on nine brass chains was a brass bottle much larger than the others he had seen, from whose mouth a tendril of smoke trailed. The acrid stench he had noted earlier was almost overpowering here, and the air was exceedingly warm and dry, as though a hot desert wind had just blown through the room.

Like the other chambers, this one was also devoid of furniture. But not of equipment. Fronting the concave wall opposite the doorway was a huge instrument panel covered with dials, buttons, knobs, teletypers, and numerous other items, some of which he couldn't identify; and above and on either side of the panel, seemingly a part of the wall itself, were tier upon tier of postage-

stamp sized screens. Both the panel and its accessories were made of the same brass-like material that was in evidence everywhere, and the screens, for all their glass-like transparency, appeared to be made of a similar, if not an identical, substance.

MESMERIZED, Billings advanced across the room and gazed up at the lowest tier of screens. Finding them to be too high to permit him to see into any of them, he glanced around the room in hopes of seeing something he could use to stand on. There appeared to be nothing. He noticed the edge of a thin shelf protruding from the left side of the instrument panel. Experimenting, he found that the shelf could be pulled out several feet and that it would more than support his weight. Climbing up on it, he chose a screen at random and leaned forward and examined it closely. It carried a three dimensional image of a tiny room. In the tiny room there was a tiny bed, a tiny table, and a tiny chair. And on the tiny chair, elbows propped upon the tiny table, sat a tiny man with a dome-like head. He was unquestionably alive, unquestionably deep in thought, and unquestionably a fraction of his actual size. From the tiny ceiling a tiny wire ran down to a tiny node on his tiny dome-like head.

Billings examined several adjacent screens. Each of them carried a similar image, only in some cases the tiny figure sitting at the tiny table was a woman—hairless and dome-like of head, but unquestionably gynecomorphous in all other respects.

The tiny rooms looked an awful lot like cells.

And the whole city, now that he came to think of it, looked an awful lot like a penitentiary.

Or a modernistic concentration camp.

But what was the purpose of the screens? What did they signify?

Billings thought he knew. Unless he was badly mistaken, he was looking at the control board of a human computing machine. And beyond the shadow of a doubt, the human beings imprisoned in the myriad cells of the city, which, of course, constituted the machine proper, were the rightful heirs of the planet Earth.

Was it growing warmer in the room, or was it his imagination? And what was that peculiar humming noise behind him?

Turning around, he saw the Jinni.

5.

Ed-Dimiryat

COMPARED to this one, the Jinni Billings had seen at the oasis had been a good-looking kid.

That one had been an 'Efrit. This one, therefore, must be a Marid, for Marids—according to no less an authority than Shahrazad herself—were the most powerful Jinn of all.

Discounting the smoke—or dust, or whatever it was—that hadn't solidified yet, the creature was about thirty-five feet tall. Its legs rose like a pair of brass pillars, its feet looked like the cornerstones of a seven-story building, its arms resembled a pair of snorkel booms, and its hands brought to mind a couple of out-size pitchforks. Its head was like a brass dome, its eyes were like gasoline lanterns, its nose was like a French horn, its ears were like TV antennae, and its mouth made Billings think of the Grand Canyon. How in the world it had ever crept up behind him without making a sound dismayed his imagination.

"Don't look at me as though I were some kind of a freak," it "said" in his mind. "We Jinn approximate the human form to the best of our ability, and no being is well pleased to have its best depreciated, be it ever so little."

By this time, Billings had regained most of the seven years' growth that had been scared out of him; and as the Marid was well within icer range, and apparently inclined to be amenable in any case, he saw no immediate cause for alarm. "Can't you make

yourself a little bit smaller?" he asked, employing twenty-second century English, since it obviously didn't matter what language he used. "It's not easy talking to a young mountain."

Obligingly, the Marid diminished itself to the dimensions of a young hill. "I am Ed-Dimiryat," it said, "the officer in charge of Terrestrial Rehabilitation. I witnessed the emergence of your aircraft this morning and dispatched a scout to report on it. Concluding from the report that you were harmless, I decided to make my headquarters accessible to you in the event you paid our Rehabilitation Center a visit."

Said the spider to the fly, thought Billings, wondering how anyone could be as dumb as he himself was. Well, anyway, he'd had brains enough not to let Shahrazad accompany him into the tower, and maybe if he played his cards right he could still rejoin her. Lord, he hoped she was all right. If anything happened to her, he'd die.

Ed-Dimiryat was still "speaking": "I've deduced from the manner of its arrival that your aircraft must be a time-ship of some kind; but the mere fact that you and your companion were riding on an aircraft of any kind would preclude your being from the ninth century, regardless of the authenticity of your

clothing, while the conformation of your craniums alone proves you can't possibly be from this one. What century *are* you from?"

SUDDENLY Billings remembered that the Marid was reading his thoughts. Was it reading the rest of his mind also? The fact that it had needed to ask a question indicated that it wasn't doing so at the moment, but didn't necessarily prove that it couldn't if it wanted to. "The answer's right here in my mind," he said. "Help yourself."

"Like your remote descendants, I can read only those thoughts that come to the surface of a being's mind while it's forming words. I repeat: what century are you from?"

Relieved, Billings answered, "The twenty-second."

"Did you come through the Veil by accident or design?"

"By accident."

"What's your name?"

"Billings, Marcus N.," Billings said. Then, figuring that it was his turn to ask a few questions: "What century is this?"

"Computed on your calendar, it would be the 100,141st."

"And what planet are you from?"

Ed-Dimiryat smiled, revealing two rows of sparkling white tombstones. "If you and your contemporaries were aware of its

existence, it would be listed in your star catalogues as Alioth XVI. Earth is one of the many planets we have taken into our fold. What else have you deduced so far?"

"That far from being a Rehabilitation Center, this place is a concentration camp—one of God knows how many others that you use for turning mankind into human computing machines for the benefit of Jinnkind."

Again, Ed-Dimiryat smiled. "You're correct in assuming that we use mankind's collective brain power to solve our problems. But that's only the secondary purpose of our human computers. Their primary purpose is to prevent mankind, by forcing them to think collectively, from trampling one another to death in selfish campaigns for power. The 'Great Man' complex began on a small scale even before your own era, I believe, and during subsequent millennia it gradually intensified to a degree where, two thousand years ago, it threatened the existence of the human race. Everybody and his brother and sister wanted to become a leader, to build a shrine for him- or herself, and to go down in history as a Great Man or a Great Woman. It was a new religion—a new way, or rather, a popularization of an old way, of acquiring immortality. Meanwhile, perhaps because of world-

wide miscegenation or perhaps in spite of it, human intelligence had reached its peak and had distributed itself on an even scale, putting 'Greatness'—theoretically at least—within everybody's reach. We arrived just in time to avert a catastrophe."

"Well, good for you," Billings said. "But in what capacity did you arrive?"

"The term in your language that fits us best is 'The Salvation Army.' Our mission in life is to do good wherever and whenever possible. Experiments showed us that after a human being reached adulthood, ten years service as a cog in a computer was enough to cure him of his selfishness forever, and we've been applying the treatment ever since. We've also been gradually transferring the human race to the various planetary utopias which we maintain throughout the galaxy. After we vacate all the people, we're going to build a galactic museum here—one that'll span the oceans and reach from pole to pole and provide room enough for every race in the galaxy to display its fossils and artifacts. This Center is one of the last of its kind."

WELL, talk about your nerve! Billings was furious—and unconvinced as well. Not for one minute did he believe that mankind had degenerated into a race

of self-seeking monsters, nor did he believe for one minute that Ed-Dimiryat & Co. had mankind's best interests at heart. Far from freeing the poor souls incarcerated in those bleak little computer cells, the Jinn would probably keep them there till they dropped dead from overthinking and then replace them with a fresh batch. But since he represented mankind's only chance of regaining their freedom, he would be wise to pretend to be as dumb as the Marid thought he was, and to defer turning it and its henchmen, who were probably lurking just beyond the tower walls (or maybe in them) into rainfalls until after he obtained some more information. "No doubt," he said, "the remaining centers are scattered all over the globe."

"Oh, no. The whole project was conducted in this area. Because of our physical constitution, we have to live in hot, dry climates, and the climate of this region proved to be the most congenial to us. It also proved to be congenial to the agricultural program that we instituted in conjunction with the project. You've seen our orchards. The fruit they bear was developed through hybridization to provide our computers with a maximum of intellectual energy, and is largely responsible for the Cerebralites' ability to solve problems that we

Jinn can't even begin to cope with."

"'Cerebralites'?"

"It's not a very good word, is it? But you coined it—I didn't—and it will have to suffice. It refers to the denizens of the computer cells."

"You implied that the project has been going on for two thousand years," Billings said. "How long have you been part of it?"

"Ever since it began."

BILLINGS blinked. Recovering himself, he said, "Next, I suppose you're going to tell me that you were a thousand years old at the time of its inception and that you've still got a couple of thousand to go."

"As a matter of fact, I was going to tell you something like that. But I can see that it would be a waste of time."

"Well, anyway," Billings went on, "whether you yourself have been around here for the past two thousand years, the Jinn in general must have been. Folklore is full of them—especially Mohammedan—which means that they didn't—and don't—confine their activities to this side of the Veil."

"During the early days of our occupation," Ed-Dimiryat said, "we went through the Veil out of curiosity alone. Then we discovered that there existed in those times a metal that has long

since disappeared from the face of the Earth and that could, when combined with two other metals, provide us with a degree of comfort that our own metals couldn't match. We've been making periodic trips through the Veil ever since."

"But how do you *get* through it?"

"It's very simple—for a Jinni. We simply move sideways, and there we are. You must have done something of the sort when you came through on your time-ship."

"No doubt I did," Billings said, "but that doesn't help much. Tell me, why have the people behind the Veil classified you and your friends as Jann, Jinn, Sheytans, 'Efrits, and Marids—and why do they consider some of you to be benevolent, some of you to be bad, and others of you to be downright mean?"

"Because, like all primitive races, they rationalize phenomena they don't understand by interpreting it according to their religious predilections. But to be fair, I suppose we do look a little like devils to them when we approximate the human form. We wouldn't dream of hurting any of them, though."

"Their folklore tells a different story. According to their legends, you made yourselves so obnoxious some sixteen or seven-

teen hundred years ago that one of them imprisoned thousands of you in brass bottles and threw the bottles into the sea."

Billings had expected a reaction, but he was unprepared for the one he got. Ed-Dimiryat's gasoline-lantern eyes incandesced, its French-horn nose flared, and its graveyard teeth ground together so violently that they threw off sparks. "That's a lie!" it "screamed." "Legends such as those were probably fabricated from the fact that we sleep in brass bottles and are capable of remaining in them for long periods of time. But no mere human could *make* us get into a bottle, much less confine us in one. Sometimes I wonder whether it pays for a Jinni to be a good Joe," the Marid went on in a sad "voice." "You knock yourself out trying to be nice to savages, and what do they do in return? They invent lies about you, they malign you behind your back, and they denigrate you in their folklore. It's not fair!"

Billings would have laughed if he hadn't been playing reluctant host to a certain frightening thought. If Ed-Dimiryat was telling the truth and the Jinn really did sleep in brass bottles, the chambers Billings had passed on his way down the ramp could be but one thing—bedrooms—while the brass bottles hanging from their ceilings could be but

one thing also—beds. Hence, each of those chambers could have contained a sleeping—or a hiding—Jinni, and those same Jinn could have roused themselves—or have come out of hiding—by this time, and have captured Shahrazad.

BUT he'd told her to leave at the first sign of danger, hadn't he? Surely, she would have obeyed. After all, she called him "master," and when a woman called you "master," surely you could assume that she considered herself to be your slave and would do as you commanded.

Or could you? From what he had seen of Shahrazad thus far, he couldn't imagine her running away from anything, whether she was ordered to or not. He especially couldn't imagine her running away from a Sheytan or an 'Efrit or a Marid.

THAT silly ring of hers! It made him mad just to think of it. As soon as he got a chance, he'd take it away from her!

But to get back to Ed-Dimiryat. Ed-Dimiryat, however, had apparently had enough of answering questions. At any rate, it had finally gotten around to asking another of its own. "What," it demanded, fixing Billings with its gasoline-lantern eyes, "is the Veil?"

Billings was bewildered. "Don't *you* know what it is?"

"Naturally—I'm a Jinni. Phenomena such as the Veil are part of a Jinni's domain. But you're not a Jinni, and consequently you can only theorize. I find such theories fascinating, and would like to hear yours."

"Very well," Billings said. "To my mind, the Veil can be but one thing—a trans-dimensional partition of some kind that prevents two realities that exist in the same place at the same time from *being* in the same place at the same time. Twenty-second century physicists have theorized that space-time warps back upon itself in the form of a quadri-dimensional Mobius strip, and they're right. But they mistakenly assume that this Mobius warp of theirs began with the birth of the cosmos and won't complete itself till the cosmos comes to an end. Actually, it can't have begun that long ago because it's already reached its halfway point—the presence of the Veil proves that. To understand what happened, it's necessary to simplify the warp by visualizing it as an ordinary Mobius strip, and by drawing a mental line along its surface. When this is done, it becomes apparent that when the line reaches the halfway point on the strip, it comes opposite its own beginning and that nothing separates

the two points except the thickness of the strip. This same situation persists throughout the remainder of the strip, and we have two lines—or, in this case, the past and the present—paralleling each other and separated only by the strip's thickness. But the thickness doesn't exist in reality, because the strip has only one surface, so actually the two lines are one line, and the past and the present are indistinguishable. The same holds true for our quadri-dimensional Mobius warp. Space-time has overlapped itself, and the year 898 A.D. and the year 100,141 A.D. exist simultaneously and coincidentally. To eliminate this paradox, the cosmos has interposed the Veil, and since the Veil represents 99,243 years, we may conclude that the duration of the warp is twice that length of time, or 198,486 years. Now, going by what you've told me and by the chronological references to the Jinn in folklore, I would estimate that the halfway point in the warp was reached sometime during the ninth or eighth century B.C., which means that the warp will have completed itself before the year 200,000 A.D."

"Excellent!" Ed-Dimiryat "exclaimed." "I'm happy to inform you that you more than qualify. Now, if your com—"

"Qualify for what?" Billings

asked, although he suspected what was coming.

"For service in the computer, of course. I must admit that for a while there I was at a loss to know what to do with you till I discovered during our conversation that despite your unremarkable cranial conformation you have a remarkable mind. Now, if your companion—"

Billings aligned his icer. "All aside from the fact that I'm not afflicted with the 'Great Man' complex," he said, "and as a result can derive no therapeutic value from such service, why should you want to lock me up in one of those cells when you've already got more brain power on your hands than you know what to do with?"

"One," said Ed-Dimiryat, apparently unaware that Billings had a bead on it, "I can't let you return through the Veil to the ninth century and thence to your own age, because you might take it into your head to come back with an army of liberation and try to free the Cerebralites; *two*, since I can't let you go, I must provide accommodations for you; and *three*, the computer cells are the only accommodations I have available. Now, if your companion can come up with a Veil theory comparable with yours, she, too, will be given a lovely little room of her own, and—"

BILLINGS had no idea how high on its intellectual yardstick the Marid would place Shahrazad's tale of the ass and the bull, and he had no intentions of waiting to find out. He unloosed the icer straight at the monster's belly—or rather, where its belly would have been if it had had one—and waited for it to rain. There was a sputter and a *pop!*, as of drops of water colliding with a hot skillet, and then a big gout of steam. When the steam cleared away, there stood the Marid, as unaffected as an elephant that had been hit by a pea.

Billings unloosed two more charges. He got two more gouts of steam, but no rain. By this time, Ed-Dimiryat was laughing—if you could call the sound of rocks bumping around in a cement mixer laughter. “Do you know how this Center and all the others like it were built, Billings?” it asked. “The Jinn took deep breaths, and blew the build-ings into being like bubbles. We may be the Salvation Army in one sense, but in another we constitute the most indestructible force the galaxy has ever known—a force comprised of matter you can’t even conceive of!” Still laughing, the Marid reached down with a pitchfork hand, plucked the icer out of Billings’ sleeve, and popped it into its mouth.

THE CITY OF BRASS

CLEARLY, the day had long since fled when David could kill Goliath with a sling. But David could still run. Diving between the pillar-like legs, Billings headed for the door. Precisely six steps later, he tripped over the hem of his *melwatah* and went sprawling on his face. Rolling over on his back, he saw a big pitchfork descending towards his face; then he saw the pitchfork pause in midair and heard a familiar golden voice say, “In the name of Suleyman Ibn-Da’ud, I command thee to desist, wretched Marid!”

Billings sat up then. Shahrazad was standing in the doorway. She had removed the big seal ring from her right forefinger and pinned it to her *jubbeh*, just above her heart. In one hand she carried a ladle of molten lead; in the other, a brass bottle.

6.

Suleyman's Seal

CARRYING the ladle and the bottle, Shahrazad advanced into the room. “Get to your feet, master,” she said to Billings, “and stand to one side. I must act quickly while the lead is still hot.”

“No, no, Shahrazad! Run for your life! I’ll try to hold the monster off till you make it to the magic carpet and—” Billings saw the change that had

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come over Ed-Dimiryat then, and his voice trailed away. The Marid was staring at the seal ring as though hypnotized, its cavernous mouth was hanging open, and its eyes were flickering as though they were running out of gasoline.

"Get to your feet and stand to one side, master," Shahrazad repeated. "I beseech you."

This time, Billings obeyed.

Advancing deeper into the room, Shahrazad set the bottle on the floor. Fearlessly, she gazed up into Ed-Dimiryat's awesome face. "Condense thyself, O Marid," she cried, "and get into this bottle that I may stopper it with lead and place thereon the seal of Suleyman Ibn-Da'ud!"

To Billings' consternation, Ed Dimiryat clasped its pitchfork hands together and kneeled on the floor—or kneeled, at least, to the extent that a being without knees can. "No! No!" it begged in ninth-century Arabic. "Spare me, mistress—spare me, please! I will do anything thou commandeth. I will enrich thee forever. I will build thee a palace fit for a queen. I will grant thee three wishes. Spare me—spare me, please!"

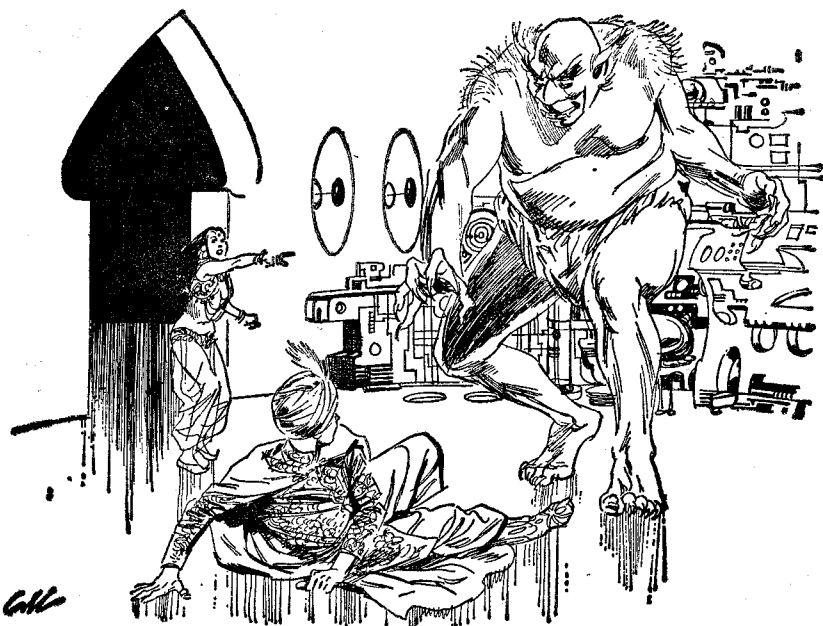
But Shahrazad was inexorable. "Get into this bottle, wretched creature. Get into it at once!"

"But it is not my size, O damsel! My own hangs above my head. Let me get into that."

"Thou wilt get into this one," said Shahrazad, "and thou wilt get into it at once. The other is too high for me to reach, and thou knowest it full well, wretched Marid!"

Not once had the Marid moved its gaze from the seal ring, and Billings saw now that the gasoline-lantern eyes had lost most of their luminescence. As he watched, the gigantic torso turned to smoke. The pitchfork-hands followed; then the columnar legs; then the cornerstone feet; finally, the dome-like head. At length, the smoke began to whirl, to shrink in upon itself. *Hum-hum-hum*, it went, and the smell of shorted wires filled the room, only it wasn't the smell of shorted wires, Billings realized now, but the smell of alien matter transmuting into ultra-alien matter. Smaller and smaller the cloud became, more and more tapered on either end. Then it rose from the floor, moved above the bottle, and little by little inched down into it. When the last wisp of vapor disappeared, Shahrazad tilted the ladle, filled the neck, and, after removing her ring from the little clasp that held it to her jubbeh, stamped the lead with the seal of Suleyman.

She replaced the ring on her finger and raised triumphant violet eyes to Billings' face. "See, master? I told you there is noth-



ing to fear from the Jinn when one has in one's possession the seal of Suleyman."

By this time Billings had his voice back. Most of it, anyway. "But the tower is probably filled with them, Shahrazad. You can't seal all of them in bottles!"

"I have already done so, master. Some of them were already in bottles, and I needed only to fill the necks with lead and place thereon the seal. But the three 'Efrits, the two Sheytans, and the Jinniyeh who came for me a little while after you left—those I had to put in bottles, and put them in, I did, and there they will remain forever. 'Long

time they ate and drank; but now, after pleasant eating, they themselves have been eaten'."

For a long while Billings just stared at her. At length, he said, "I thought I told you to leave if you were in danger. I thought—"

"But there was no *need* for me to leave, master, because there was no danger. And I—I would not have left even had there been. I—I could not let you die. After you left, the light became darkness before my eyes, and my heart almost burst from my body; but now the darkness is light again, and my heart rejoices. Thy turban has become

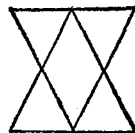
unwound again," she continued. "Here, let me repair it," and setting the ladle aside, she reached up and made Billings' headpiece presentable again. "There, it is much better now."

BILLINGS reminded himself six times that, appearances to the contrary, standing before him was not an innocent young girl smitten with puppy love, but the resourceful mistress of the Sultan of WayBackWhen. Then, just for good measure, he reminded himself six times that she was also a VIPP, and doubly verboten. But neither remedy was enough to counteract the tumultuous goings on that had recently begun in the region of his heart. He needed something to take his mind off that full, heart-shaped face of hers, something to get the pervasive radiation of those violet eyes out of his system; and fortunately something was available. "Let me see your ring," he said, "so that I can more fully appreciate the power of Suleyman Ibn-Da'ud."

She held out her right hand and he took it in his, an action that did nothing to quiet his heartbeat either. Forcing himself to concentrate on the ring, he discovered that, just as she had said, it was made of both iron and brass. Arabic characters were engraved upon both components—Suleyman's com-

mands to the bad and the good Jinn, no doubt—and in addition there was a line of characters that he took to be the Most Great Name.

FOR the most part, the characters were too minute for him to have deciphered them even if he had been capable of such a task; but he was less interested in the meanings of the words than he was in the geometric figure that they formed. Releasing Shahrazad's hand, he told her to hold the ring up, seal facing outward; then he stepped back several paces. The figure stood out clearly at this distance, and he wondered why he hadn't noticed it before. The two equilateral triangles formed by the tiny characters were the forerunner—possibly a variation—of the six-pointed star that someday would be—and in one sense was already—known as the Star of David. In the present instance, the triangles only partially overlapped, forming the following outline:



Staring at the seal, Billings discovered that it had a slight

hypnotic effect even upon him. To Ed-Dimiryat & Co. the effect must have been overwhelming; but just the same, something more had been needed than a pair of equilateral triangles to reduce the Marid and its henchmen to the Alioth XVI equivalent of jelly. And that something, logically enough, was the iron that the ring contained.

Why not? Since entering the tower, he hadn't seen a single object that was made of material other than brass, either the real thing, or the brass-like alloy out of which the tower—and probably the whole Center—was constructed (and which, to hear Ed-Dimiryat talk, the Jinn manufactured in their own bodies). Moreover, Billings himself had no iron on his person (his icer had been made of steelite, which despite its trade name had no more to do with steel than cotton candy did), and it was reasonable to assume that, with the exception of Shahrazad's ring, there was none in the immediate vicinity. Certainly, then, in view of what had happened, it wasn't unreasonable to conclude that to the Jinn the metal was as toxic as endrin was to man.

Here, therefore, in the form of a simple talisman, was the ultimate weapon insofar as the Jinn were concerned, and it had remained not for the intellectual giants of the future to invent it

but—assuming the legend to be true—for a primitive king who had lived in the days when the Jinn had first started coming through the Veil. And in the last analysis, it had remained for the daughter of a ninth-century wezir to duplicate it some seventeen centuries later and to employ it to free the world of a quantity at least of its oppressors, and to make possible the eventual liberation of the human race.

Billings turned and faced the tiers of screens. He wondered what this particular batch of Cerebralites would say when they learned that they owed their forthcoming freedom to a damsel out of a past so distant they had probably forgotten its existence. They weren't about to be freed just yet, though. First, while they still functioned as a single entity, they were going to solve a pair of top-priority problems—to wit, the problem posed by the disconnected Trans-Era coaxial cable and the problem posed by the Veil.

He took Shahrazad over to the computer control-board and helped her climb up on the instrument-panel shelf so she could get a close view of the screens. "Do you know what those are?" he asked.

"Of course, master. They are magic pictures. But they are excessively stupid: each one is almost exactly like the other."

OH, well, Billings thought, and climbed up on the shelf beside her. Leaning over the panel, he examined the various instruments. Among them was a device that resembled a small radio telescope but which was clearly nothing of the sort. The longer he looked at it, the more inclined he was to believe that it was a thought-receiver into which questions could be fed telepathically. Since his spoken words had registered in Ed-Dimiryat's mind as thoughts, he saw no reason why he shouldn't give the device a try, so he leaned closer to it, and, employing twenty-second century English, broke the news that the Jinn in charge of the Center had been overcome and that all the rest of the Jinn could be similarly overcome; then he explained his and Shahr-azad's predicament, described in detail what had happened to the Trans-Era A.P., and asked how the unit could be repaired. "Answer must be given in twenty-second century English," he added.

Scanning several of the nearer screens, he saw that the faces depicted in them showed no reaction. He was about to try some of the other panel paraphernalia when he noticed a tiny button at the base of the "radio telescope." After depressing it, he repeated everything he had said. This time, the tiny faces showed a

definite reaction, but whether the change in their expressions denoted delight or disdain, he could not tell.

PRESENTLY one of the teletypers began to hum, and words and sentences began marching along a luminiscent strip just above it. TAKE TWO HAIRPINS, Billings read. ANY KIND WILL DO. STRAIGHTEN THEM. ATTACH HAIRPIN NO. 1 TO GREEN COAXIAL STRAND. ATTACH HAIRPIN NO. 2 TO BLUE COAXIAL STRAND. CROSS HAIRPINS. ATTACH OTHER END OF HAIRPIN NO. 1 TO YELLOW POWER-PAC NODE. ATTACH OTHER END OF HAIRPIN NO. 2 TO PURPLE POWER-PAC NODE. ACTIVATE UNIT AND PROCEED AS USUAL.

Sheepishly, he turned to Shahr-azad. "Do you have two hairpins, doll?"

"Oh, yes, master—I have many," she said, and pulled two of them out of her night-dark hair and handed them to him.

Pocketing them, he saw that the teletyper was still in operation and that more words and sentences were marching across the luminiscent strip: LIBERATE US LIBERATE US LIBERATE US AND WE WILL MAKE YOU OUR LEADER. TURN OFF THE TOWER LIGHT—THAT IS WHAT

HOLDS US IN SUBJUGATION. THE SWITCH IS NEXT TO THE THOUGHT-RELAY UNIT THAT YOU HAVE JUST SPOKEN INTO. LIBERATE US LIBERATE US LIBERATE US!

"One more question," Billings said. "How can my companion and I pass back through the Veil on the time-sled and get back to when and where we were?"

The answer came promptly: BY RETURNING TO THE APPROXIMATE POINT OF YOUR EMERGENCE AND DUPLICATING THE ACTION THAT RESULTED IN YOUR BEING CATAPULTED THROUGH THE VEIL IN THE FIRST PLACE. YOU CAN REPAIR THE TRANS-ERA-POWER-PAC COAXIAL CABLE AND PROCEED TO WHENEVER YOU WISH TO GO. LIBERATE US LIBERATE US LIBERATE US! Flash: WE HAVE ALREADY MADE YOU OUR LEADER!

Just like that, Billings thought a little giddily. A scant second ago he'd been an obscure VIPNapier; now he was a Leader of the People!

He found the switch and turned out the tower light.

Instantly, the tiny figures leaped from their tiny chairs, detached the tiny electrodes from their tiny heads, and dashed out of their tiny cells.

Mere seconds later, a giant ten feet tall burst into the computer room with innumerable other giants crowding behind him. "You aren't the leader any more!" he "bellowed" in Billings' mind. "I am. I rose to power on the way over, and now I'm going to assassinate you!"

Billings groaned. When it came to opening boxes, Pandora had nothing on him.

Collectively, the Cerebralites had chosen him as their leader, and probably they had done so out of genuine gratitude; but collectively they were one thing, and individually they were quite another. To put it bluntly, they were monsters compared to whom the Jinn Shahrazad had bottled were a troop of boy scouts.

He looked at Shahrazad. It was apparent from the prenatal wideness of her violet eyes that the new leader's declaration had gotten through to her too, and it was equally as apparent from the way she was looking first at the vacant screens and then at the Cerebralites that she had deduced the provenance of the latter.

Billings groaned again. A lot of good Suleyman's seal was going to do her now.

The new leader advanced into the room, the foremost ranks of his People crowding behind him.

Each and everyone of them looked as though he or she was capable of stabbing him in the back at the next tick of the political clock. Altogether, it was as ominous a gathering as Billings had ever seen, and proved to him beyond a doubt not only that most of what Ed-Dimiryat had said was true but that the change in the physical stature of mankind that had set in during the twentieth century had continued unabated down through to the 100,141st.

Lord help the Jinn.

Lord help Shahrazad.

"Look," he said, "I'll make a deal with you. Send the girl back through the Veil on the time-sled, and I'll promise not to put up any resistance."

THE statement called for a laugh, and it got one. "Ha!" said the new leader.

"H'm'm," said Shahrazad.

The former looked at the latter. The latter returned the former's gaze with fearless violet eyes. "How wert thou and thy companions in those little rooms?" she asked in that marvelous golden voice of hers. "They will not contain thy hands or thy feet—how then can they contain thy bodies?"

The new leader stared at her. It was obvious that he, like Billings, had never seen anyone quite like her. "Don't you be-

lieve we were in them?" he asked.

"I will never believe thou wert in them until I see thee in them."

The Cerebralites had come to a dead stop. It was clear from the blank expressions on their faces that they were confronted with a situation with which, despite their *avant-garde* intellectuality—or perhaps because of it—they were no more qualified to cope than Shahrazad would have been qualified to cope with a twentieth-century traffic jam. "You really don't believe we were in those rooms?" the new leader asked. "You *really* don't?"

"I will never believe thou wert in them until I see thee in them," Shahrazad repeated stoutly.

THERE was a long pause. Then, "Let's show her!" the new leader shouted. "It won't take long!"

SHOW HER SHOW HER SHOW HER, the thoughts of his companions echoed, as the Cerebralites filed from the room. SHOW HER SHOW HER SHOW HER!

Presently the room was empty.

Stunned, Billings turned and looked at the screens. Shahrazad turned and looked at them too. In the lower ones, tiny men and women could be seen entering tiny rooms, sitting down on tiny

chairs, and attaching tiny electrodes to their tiny heads. At length, the teletyper came to life, and another parade of words and sentences began on the luminescent strip. THERE, ARE YOU SATISFIED? ARE YOU ARE YOU ARE YOU?

Billings turned the teletyper off.

He turned on the tower light.

He still couldn't believe it.

He faced Shahrazad and opened his mouth to say something. Then he closed it again and climbed down from the shelf. He helped her down beside him. "I guess you know," he said, "that we've got to liberate the Jinn."

"Yes, master. There are some evils in the world that are necessary, and the Jinn are one of them. But first, we will make a covenant with their leader."

The Marid was in no position to argue. Would it see to it that once they were cured the Cerebralites lived full and happy lives? It would. Would it promise never to go through the Veil again and to see to it that none of the other Jinn did either? So help it, it would. Would it, hereafter, pray to the One True God once at dawn, once after midday, once before sunset, once after sunset, and once just before nightfall?

On bended knees. . . .

Drifting over the lake in the light of the 100,141st-century

moon, Shahrazad said, "Is it thy intention, master, to take me as thy bride upon our arrival at thy palace?"

Miserably, Billings answered, "I can't, Shahrazad."

She stiffened on the seat beside him. "Dost thou not love me?"

"I love you very much."

"Then why wilt thou not take me as thy bride? The poet says, 'Defer not pleasure when it can be had; for fortune often destroyeth our plans'."

"I know, Shahrazad. But I can never take you as my bride."

"Because of King Shahriyar perhaps? I do not care a fig for him."

"It's not that, Shahrazad. It's something else."

He wanted to tell her how it was with VIPPs like herself. How it was forbidden by law to remove them permanently from the day and age that had given them birth. How it was impossible to remove them permanently in any event, or to interfere with the pattern of their lives, because Time, while it ignored Unimportant Past Persons, regarded VIPPs the way a mother hen regards her chicks, and would have a cosmic conniption were one of them to stray from the fold. But how could he tell her? How could he make her understand? "I'm sorry, Shahrazad."

"Thy abode is between my heart and my eyes; and my heart

will not relinquish thee, nor my tears conceal my pain."

The sled was above the oasis now. Miserably, Billings punched H-O-V-E-R on the Intra-Era A.P. Then, deliberately, he leaned forward and punched P-R on the Trans-Era A.P. As before, his right ankle informed him that he had further outraged its already outraged cartilage, and as before, he straightened his right leg to relieve the pain—and in the process kicked the Trans-Era-power-pac coaxial cable partway from its moorings. There was a jar, a lurch, and a brief period of darkness. . . .

7.

Dunyazad

THE Story of the Porter and The Ladies of Baghdad, and of The Three Royal Mendicants" had almost come to an end, but Billings still stood spellbound. People still pressed in upon him from behind and on either side, and still he remained unaware of their existence. He knew only the lovely animannikin reclining on the Sultan's couch, and the cadence of his heart.

And oh, yes, the remembered fragrance of nedd, for the fragrance was all around him.

In the background, songs from *Scheherazade*; in the foreground, the beauty of Shahrazad's golden voice . . . "The Khalifeh then sent for Kadis and witnesses, and

the first lady and her two sisters who had been transformed into bitches he married to the three mendicants who had related that they were the sons of Kings; and these he made chamberlains of his court, appointing them all that they required, and allotting them apartments in the palace of Bagdad. The lady who had been beaten he restored to his son El-Emin, giving her a large property, and ordering that the house should be rebuilt in a more handsome style. Lastly, the lady cateress he took as his own wife; he admitted her at once to his own apartment, and, on the following day, he appointed her a separate lodging for herself, with female slaves to wait upon her: he also allotted to her a regular income; and afterwards built for her a palace. . . ."

THE golden voice trailed away. Billings could not move. . . . He would return in the night and steal her and spirit her away, and they would climb upon a magic carpet and speed to some wind-blown oasis; and there he would build a palace, and in the palace there would be a couch, and nightly he would lie upon the couch and she would recline beside him, telling him the tales she had told long ago to a real king, perhaps some of those she had told to a lonely time-traveler who had kidnaped her from her lord

and master's palace and become marooned with her in the land beyond the Veil; who had fallen in love with her and had had to let her go because of the selfishness of Time. . . . Time, you have been my undoing, for I have fallen in love with a woman who has lain for centuries dead. Yes, I will steal this lovely damsel, I will steal her again—and this time I will keep her, and be damned to Time. I will not deliver her to Big Pygmalion as I did before, and turn to her and say, "Good by, Shahrazad," and rush off on an assignment that will put six months between us, only to rush to her life-sized replica the moment I return, more in love than I was when I left. Be damned to Time. I spit on Time. If I cannot have her, I will have the doll I made possible for Big Pygmalion to create. Yes, I will steal this charming wonderful doll and spirit it away in the night, and I will cherish it as though it were flesh and blood, and keep it with me forever. . . .

But a doll was a doll, and for all of Big Pygmalion's electronic sorcery could never be anything more, and Billings knew it. Wretchedly, he turned and started to walk away. As he did so, he collided with a brunette who was standing just behind him. Her night-dark hair was upswept in one of the latest coiffures, her face was heart-shaped and full,

and her eyes were the hue of violets after a warm spring rain. The black shift she was wearing was having no more success in concealing her curves than a jubbeh and a pair of ankle-length bloomers had had way back in the land of WayBackWhen.

"I have lost my existence among mankind since your absence," she said, "for my heart loveth none but you."

THE fragrance of nedd was all around him, and she had sprinkled willow-flower water in her hair. . . . He realized presently that he was kissing her and that she was kissing him, and after a while he became aware that they were walking hand in hand toward the animuseum door. "I am not Shahrazad," she said, this time in twenty-second century English. "I am her sister, whom you stole by mistake. Her sister Dunyzad. I would have told you before, but I knew it was Shahrazad you had come to bear away, and I wanted it to be me, because I was unhappy in the Sultan's palace, and miserable and afraid. And when I learned why you had really stolen me, I refused to go back. And when the people you work for found out I really wasn't Shahrazad but only an Unimportant Past Person, they let me stay. And they sent me to speed-school, where I learned to speak your language and learned

many things about this marvelous kingdom in which you live. And they said that they were glad in a way that I wasn't Shahrazad, because Shahrazad couldn't possibly have had more tales in her head for Big Pygmalion to have drawn on. And they said, 'We won't say a thing about this to Mark, and you can surprise him when he gets back'; so when you got back, I did."

Yes, yes, Billings remembered now. When Shahrazad had gone to live with the Sultan, she had taken her kid sister with her as a sort of "straight-girl," and evenings Dunyzad had sat at the foot of the Sultan's couch, and when it came time for a tale she would say, "By Allah! O my sister, relate to us a story to beguile

the waking hour of our night," and Shahrazad would.

They were in the street now, riding a walk-walk to the HOVER lot where Billings' commutabout was parked. Billings signaled to it, and down it came just like a magic carpet, and hovered beside them; and they stepped on board and climbed into the twenty-second century sky. "How much do you love me?" Dunyzad asked, as a bluebird winged past the windshield.

"Excessively," said Billings, Marcus N., and bent and kissed her. . . . And they lived together in the utmost happiness for many wondrous and fruitful years till at last they were visited by the terminator of delights and the separator of companions.

THE END

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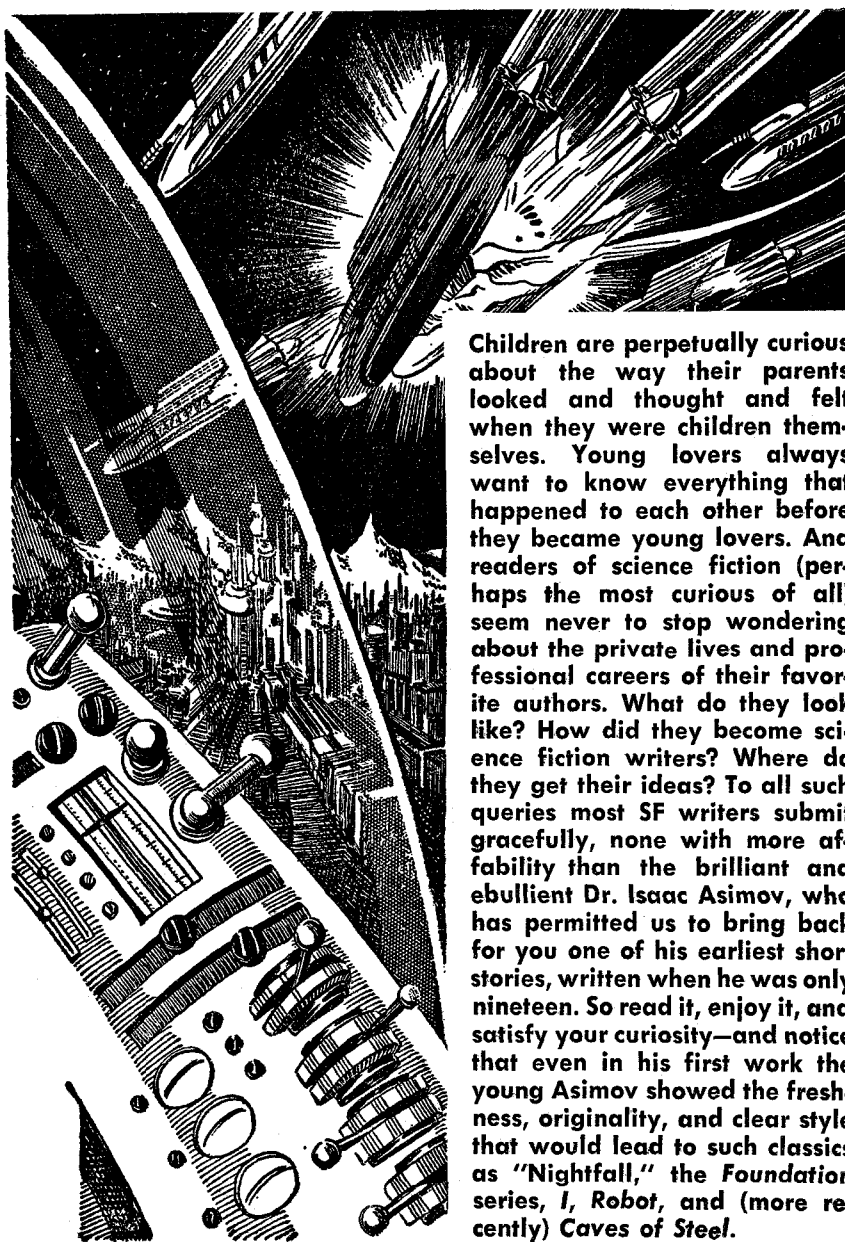


THE WEAPON TOO DREADFUL TO USE

Illustrator
JULIAN KRUPA

By ISAAC ASIMOV

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Children are perpetually curious about the way their parents looked and thought and felt when they were children themselves. Young lovers always want to know everything that happened to each other before they became young lovers. And readers of science fiction (perhaps the most curious of all) seem never to stop wondering about the private lives and professional careers of their favorite authors. What do they look like? How did they become science fiction writers? Where do they get their ideas? To all such queries most SF writers submit gracefully, none with more affability than the brilliant and ebullient Dr. Isaac Asimov, who has permitted us to bring back for you one of his earliest short stories, written when he was only nineteen. So read it, enjoy it, and satisfy your curiosity—and notice that even in his first work the young Asimov showed the freshness, originality, and clear style that would lead to such classics as "Nightfall," the *Foundation* series, *I, Robot*, and (more recently) *Caves of Steel*.

KARL FRANTOR found the prospect a terribly dismal one. From low-hanging clouds, fell eternal misty rain; squat, rubbery vegetation with its dull, reddish-brown color stretched away in all directions. Now and then a Hop-sotch Bird fluttered wildly above them, emitting plaintive squawks as it went.

Karl turned his head to gaze at the tiny dome of *Aphrodopolis*, largest city on Venus.

"God," he muttered, "even the dome is better than this awful world out here." He pulled the rubberized fabric of his coat closer about him, "I'll be glad to get back to Earth again."

He turned to the slight figure of Antil, the Venusian, "When are we coming to the ruins, Antil?"

There was no answer and Karl noticed the tear that rolled down the Venusian's green, puckered cheeks. Another glistened in the large, lemur-like eyes; soft, incredibly beautiful eyes.

The Earthman's voice softened. "Sorry, Antil, I didn't mean to say anything against Venus."

Antil turned his green face toward Karl, "It was not that, my friend. Naturally, you would not find much to admire in an alien world. I, however, love Venus, and I weep because I am overcome with its beauty." The words

came fluently but with the inevitable distortion caused by vocal cords unfitted for harsh languages.

"I know it seems incomprehensible to you," Antil continued, "but to me Venus is a paradise, a golden land—I cannot express my feelings for it properly."

"Yet there are some that say only Earthmen can love." Karl's sympathy was strong and sincere.

The Venusian shook his head sadly. "There is much besides the capacity to feel emotion that your people deny us."

Karl changed the subject hurriedly. "Tell me, Antil, doesn't Venus present a dull aspect even to you. You've been to Earth and should know. How can this eternity of brown and gray compare to the living, warm colors of Earth."

"It is far more beautiful to me. You forget that my color-sense is so enormously different from yours.* How can I explain the beauties, the wealth of color in which this landscape abounds." He fell silent, lost in the wonders he spoke of, while to the Terrestrial the deadly, melancholy gray remained unchanged.

*The Venusian eye can distinguish between two tints the wavelengths of which differ by as little as five Angstrom units. They see thousands of colors to which Earthmen are blind.—Author.

"Someday," Antil's voice came as from a person in a dream, "Venus will once more belong to the Venusians. The Earthlings shall no longer rule us, and the glory of our ancestors shall return to us."

Karl laughed. "Come, now, Antil, you speak like a member of the Green Bands, that are giving the government so much trouble. I thought you didn't believe in violence."

"I don't, Karl," Antil's eyes were grave and rather frightened, "but the extremists are gaining power, and I fear the worst. And if—if open rebellion against Earth breaks out, I *must* join them."

"But you disagree with them."

"Yes, of course," he shrugged his shoulders, a gesture he had learned from Earthmen, "we can gain nothing by violence. There are five billion of you and scarcely a hundred million of us. You have resources and weapons while we have none. It would be a fool's venture and even should we win, we might leave such a heritage of hatred that there could never be peace between our two planets."

"Then why join them?"

"Because I am a Venusian."

The Earthman burst into laughter again. "Patriotism, it seems, is as irrational on Venus as on Earth. But come, come, let us proceed to the ruins of your

ancient city. Are we nearly there?"

"Yes," answered Antil, "it's a matter of little more than an Earth mile now. Remember, however, that you are to disturb nothing. The ruins of *Ash-taz-zor* are sacred to us, as the sole existing remnant of the time when we, too, were a great race, rather than the degenerate remains of one."

THEY walked on in silence, slogging through the soft earth beneath, dodging the writhing roots of the Snaketree, and giving the occasional Tumbling Vines they passed a wide berth.

It was Antil then who resumed conversation.

"Poor Venus." His quiet, wistful voice was sad. "Fifty years ago the Earthmen came with promises of peace and plenty—and we believed. We showed them the emerald mines and the *juju* weed and their eyes glittered with desire. More and more came, and their arrogance grew. And now—"

"It's too bad, Antil," Karl said, "but you really feel too strongly about it."

"Too strongly! Are we allowed to vote? Have we any representation at all in the Venusian Provincial Congress? Aren't there laws against Venusians riding in the same strato-cars as Earthlings, or eating in the same ho-

tel, or living in the same house? Are not all colleges closed to us? Aren't the best and most fertile parts of the planet pre-empted by Earthlings? Are there any rights *at all* that Terrestrials allow us upon our *own* planet?"

"What you say is perfectly true, and I deplore it. But similar conditions once existed on Earth with regard to certain so-called "inferior races," and in time, all those disabilities were removed until today total equality reigns. Remember, too, that the intelligent people of Earth are on your side. Have I, for instance, ever displayed any prejudice against a Venusian?"

"No, Karl, you know you haven't. But how many intelligent men are there? On Earth, it took long and weary millennia, filled with war and suffering, before equality was established. What if Venus refuses to wait those millennia?"

Karl frowned, "You're right, of course, but you must wait. What else can you do?"

"I don't know—I don't know," Antil's voice trailed into silence.

Suddenly, Karl wished he hadn't started on this trip to the ruins of mysterious *Ash-taz-zor*. The maddeningly monotonous terrain, the just grievances of Antil had served to depress him greatly. He was about to call the whole thing off when the Venusian raised his webbed fingers

to point out a mound of earth ahead.

"That's the entrance," he said; "*Ash-taz-zor* has been buried under the soil for uncounted thousands of years, and only Venusians know of it. You're the first Earthman ever to see it."

"I shall keep it absolutely secret, Antil. I have promised."

"Come then."

ANTIL brushed aside the lush vegetation to reveal a narrow entrance between two boulders and beckoned to Karl to follow. Into a narrow, damp corridor they crept. Antil drew from his pouch a small Atomite lamp, which cast its pearly white glow upon walls of dripping stone.

"These corridors and burrows," he said, "were dug three centuries ago by our ancestors who considered the city a holy place. Of late, however, we have neglected it. I was the first to visit it in a long, long time. Perhaps that is another sign of our degeneracy."

For over a hundred yards they walked on straight ahead; then the corridor flared out into a lofty dome. Karl gasped at the view before him. There were the remains of buildings, architectural marvels unrivaled on Earth since the days of Periclean Athens. But all lay in shattered ruins, so that only a hint of the city's magnificence remained.

Antil led the way across the open space and plunged into another burrow that twisted its way for half a mile through soil and rock. Here and there, side-corridors branched off, and once or twice Karl caught glimpses of ruined structures. He would have investigated had not Antil kept him on the path.

Again they emerged, this time before a low, sprawling building constructed of a smooth, green stone. Its right wing was utterly smashed, but the rest seemed scarcely touched.

The Venusian's eyes shone; his slight form straightened with pride. "This is what corresponds to a modern museum of arts and sciences. In this you shall see the past greatness and culture of Venus."

WITH high excitement, Karl entered—the first Earthman ever to see these ancient achievements. The interior, he found, was divided into a series of deep alcoves, branching out from the long central colonnade. The ceiling was one great painting that showed dimly in the light of the Atomite lamp.

Lost in wonder, the Earthman wandered through the alcoves. There was an extraordinary sense of strangeness to the sculptures and paintings about him, an unearthliness that doubled their beauty.

Karl realized that he missed something vital in Venusian art simply because of the lack of common ground between his own culture and theirs, but he could appreciate the technical excellence of the work. Especially, did he admire the color-work of the paintings which went far beyond anything he had ever seen on Earth. Cracked, faded, and scaling though they were, there was a blending and a harmony about them that was superb.

"What wouldn't Michelangelo have given," he said to Antil, "to have the marvelous color perception of the Venusian eye."

Antil inflated his chest with happiness. "Every race has its own attributes. I have often wished *my* ears could distinguish the slight tones and pitches of sound the way it is said Earthmen can. Perhaps I would then be able to understand what it is that is so pleasing about your Terrestrial music. As it is, its noise is dreadfully monotonous to me."

They passed on, and every minute Karl's opinion of Venusian culture mounted higher. There were long, narrow strips of thin metal, bound together, covered with the lines and ovals of Venusian script—thousands upon thousands of them. In them, Karl knew, might lie such secrets as the scientists of Earth would give half their lives to know.

Then, when Antil pointed out a tiny six-inch-high affair, and said that, according to the inscription, it was some type of atomic converter with an efficiency several times any of the current Terrestrial models, Karl exploded.

"Why don't you reveal these secrets to Earth? If they only knew your accomplishments in ages past, Venusians would occupy a far higher place than they do now."

"They would make use of our knowledge of former days, yes," Antil replied bitterly, "but they would never release their stranglehold on Venus and its people. I hope you are not forgetting your promise of absolute secrecy."

"No, I'll keep quiet, but I think you're making a mistake."

"I think not," Antil turned to leave the alcove but Karl called to him to wait.

"Aren't we going into this little room here?" he asked.

Antil whirled, eyes staring, "Room? What room are you talking about? There's no room here."

Karl's eyebrows shot up in surprise as he mutely pointed out the narrow crack that extended half way up the rear wall.

The Venusian muttered something beneath his breath and fell to his knees, delicate fingers probing the crack.

"Help me, Karl. This door was never meant to be opened, I think. At least there is no record of its being here, and I know the ruins of *Ash-taz-zor* perhaps better than any other of my people."

The two pushed against the section of the wall, which gave backward with groaning reluctance for a short distance, then yielded suddenly so as to catapult them into the tiny, almost empty cubicle beyond. They regained their feet and stared about.

THE Earthman pointed out broken, ragged rust-streaks on the floor, and along the line where door joined wall. "Your people seem to have sealed this room up pretty effectively. Only the rust of eons broke the bonds. You'd think they had some sort of secret stored here."

Antil shook his green head. "There was no evidence of a door last time I was here. However—" he raised the Atomite lamp up high and surveyed the room rapidly, "there doesn't seem to be anything here, anyway."

He was right. Aside from a nondescript oblong chest that squatted on six stubby legs, the place contained only unbelievable quantities of dust and the musty, almost suffocating smell of long-shut-up tombs.

Karl approached the chest, tried to move it from the corner where it stood. It didn't budge,

but the cover slipped under his pressing fingers.

"The cover's removable, Antil. Look!" He pointed to a shallow compartment within, which contained a square slab of some glassy substance and five six-inch-long cylinders, resembling fountain-pens.

Antil shrieked with delight when he saw these objects and for the first time since Karl knew him, lapsed into sibilant Venusian gibberish. He removed the glassy slab and inspected it closely. Karl, his curiosity aroused, did likewise. It was covered with closely-spaced, varicolored dots, but there seemed no reason for Antil's extreme glee.

"What is it, Antil?"

"It is a complete document in our ancient ceremonial language. Up to now we have never had more than disjointed fragments. This is a great find."

"Can you decipher it?" Karl regarded the object with more respect.

"I think I can. It is a dead language and I know little more than a smattering. You see, it is a color language. Each word is designated by a combination of two, and sometimes three, colored dots. The colors are finely differentiated, though, and a Terrestrial, even if he had the key to the language, would have to use a spectroscope to read it."

"Can you work on it now?"

"I think so, Karl. The Atomite lamp approximates normal daylight very closely, and I ought to have no trouble with it. However, it may take me quite a time; so perhaps you'd better continue your investigation. There's no danger of your getting lost, provided you remain inside this building."

Karl left, taking a second Atomite lamp with him, left Antil, the Venusian, bent over the ancient manuscript, deciphering it slowly and painfully.

TWO hours passed before the Earthman returned; but when he did, Antil had scarcely changed his position. Yet, now, there was a look of horror on the Venusian's face that had not been there before. The "color" message lay at his feet, disregarded. The noisy entrance of the Earthman made no impression upon him. As if ossified, he sat in unmoving, staring fright.

Karl jumped to his side. "Antil, Antil, what's wrong?"

Antil's head, turned slowly, as though moving through viscous liquid, and his eyes gazed unseeingly at his friend. Karl grasped the other's thin shoulders and shook him unmercifully.

The Venusian came to his senses. Writhing out of Karl's grasp he sprang to his feet. From the desk in the corner he removed the five cylindrical ob-

jects, handling them with a queer sort of reluctance, placing them in his pouch. There, likewise, did he put the slab he had deciphered.

Having done this, he replaced the cover on the chest and motioned Karl out of the room. "We must go now. Already we have stayed too long." His voice had an odd, frightened tone about it that made the Earthman uncomfortable.

Silently, they retraced their steps until once more they stood upon the soaked surface of Venus. It was still day, but twilight was near. Karl felt a growing hunger. They would need to hurry if they expected to reach *Aphrodopolis* before the coming of night. Karl turned up the collar of his slicker, pulled his rubberized cap low over his forehead and set out.

MILE after mile passed by and the domed city once more rose upon the grey horizon. The Earthman chewed at damp ham sandwiches, wished fervently for the comfortable dryness of *Aphrodopolis*. Through it all, the normally friendly Venusian maintained a stony silence, vouchsafing not so much as a glance upon his companion.

Karl accepted this philosophically. He had a far higher regard for Venusians than the great majority of Earthmen, but even he

experienced a faint disdain for the ultra-emotional character of Antil and his kind. This brooding silence was but a manifestation of feelings that in Karl would perhaps have resulted in no more than a sigh or a frown. Realizing this, Antil's mood scarcely affected him.

Yet the memory of the haunting fright in Antil's eyes aroused a faint unease. It had come after the translation of that queer slab. What secret could have been revealed in that message by those scientific progenitors of the Venusians?

It was with some diffidence that Karl finally persuaded himself to ask, "What did the slab say, Antil? It must be interesting, I judge, considering that you've taken it with you."

Antil's reply was simply a sign to hurry, and the Venusian thereupon plunged into the gathering darkness with redoubled speed. Karl was puzzled and rather hurt. He made no further attempt at conversation for the duration of the trip.

When they reached *Aphrodopolis*, however, the Venusian broke his silence. His puckered face, drawn and haggard, turned to Karl with the expression of one who has come to a painful decision.

"Karl," he said, "we have been friends, so I wish to give you a bit of friendly advice. You are

going to leave for Earth next week. I know your father is high in the councils of the Planetary President. You yourself will probably be a personage of importance in the not-too-distant future. Since this is so, I beg you earnestly to use every atom of your influence to a moderation of Earth's attitude toward Venus. I, in my turn, being a hereditary noble of the largest tribe on Venus, shall do my utmost to repress all attempts at violence."

The other frowned. "There seems to be something behind all this. I don't get it at all. What are you trying to say?"

"Just this. Unless conditions are bettered—and soon—Venus will rise in revolt. In that case, I will have no choice but to place my services at her feet, and then Venus will no longer be defenseless."

These words served only to amuse the Earthman. "Come, Antil. Your patriotism is admirable, and your grievances justified, but melodrama and chauvinism don't go with me. I am, above all, a realist."

There was a terrible earnestness in the Venusian's voice. "Believe me, Karl, when I say nothing is more real than what I tell you now. In case of a Venusian revolt, I cannot vouch for Earth's safety."

"Earth's safety!" The enormity of this stunned Karl.

"Yes," continued Antil, "for I may be forced to destroy Earth. There you have it." With this, he wheeled and plunged into the underbrush on the way back to the little Venusian village outside the great dome.

FIVE years passed—years of turbulent unrest, and Venus stirred in its sleep like an awakening volcano. The short-sighted Terrestrial masters of *Aphrodopolis*, *Venusia*, and other domed cities cheerfully disregarded all danger signals. When they thought of the little green Venusians at all, it was with a disdainful grimace as if to say, "Oh, THOSE things!"

But "those things" were finally pushed beyond endurance, and the nationalistic Green Bands became increasingly vociferous with every passing day. Then, on one grey day, not unlike the grey days preceding, crowds of natives swarmed upon the cities in organized rebellion.

The smaller domes, caught by surprise, succumbed. In rapid succession *New Washington*, *Mount Vulcan*, and *St. Denis* were taken together with the entire eastern continent. Before the reeling Terrestrials realized what was happening, half of Venus was no longer theirs.

Earth, shocked and stunned by this sudden emergency—which, of course, should have been fore-

seen—sent arms and supplies to the inhabitants of the remaining beleaguered towns and began to equip a great space fleet for the recovery of the lost territory.

Earth was annoyed but not frightened, knowing that ground lost by surprise could easily be regained at leisure, and that ground not now lost would never be lost. Or such, at least, was the belief.

Imagine, then, the stupefaction of Earth's leaders as no pause came in the Venusian advance. *Venusia City* had been amply stocked with weapons and food; her outer defenses were up, the men at their posts. A tiny army of naked, unarmed natives approached and demanded unconditional surrender. *Venusia* refused haughtily, and the messages to Earth were mirthful in their references to the unarmed natives who had become so recklessly flushed with success.

Then, suddenly, no more messages were received, and the natives took over *Venusia*.

The events at *Venusia* were duplicated, over and over again, at what should have been impregnable fortresses. Even *Aphrodopolis* itself, with half a million population, fell to a pitiful five hundred Venusians. This, in spite of the fact that every weapon known to Earth was available to the defenders.

The Terrestrial Government

suppressed the facts, and Earth itself remained unsuspecting of the strange events on Venus; but in the inner councils, statesmen frowned as they listened to the strange words of Karl Frantor, son of the Minister of Education.

JAN HEERSEN, Minister of War, rose in anger at the conclusion of the report.

"Do you wish us to take seriously the random statement of a half-mad Greenie and make our peace with Venus on its own terms? That is definitely and absolutely impossible. What those damned beasts need is the mailed fist. Our fleet will blast them out of the Universe, and it is time that it were done."

"The blasting may not be so simple, Heersen," said the grey-haired, elder Frantor, rushing to his son's defense. "There are many of us who have all along claimed that the Government policy toward the Venusians was all wrong. Who knows what means of attack they have found and what, in revenge, they will do with it?"

"Fairy Tales!" exclaimed Heersen. "You treat the Greenies as if they were people. They're animals and should be thankful for the benefits of civilization we brought them. Remember, we're treating them much better than some of our own Earth races were treated in our early history,

the Red Indians for example."

Karl Frantor burst in once more in an agitated voice. "We must investigate, sirs! Antil's threat is too serious to disregard, no matter how silly it sounds—and in the light of the Venusian conquests, it sounds anything but silly. I propose that you send me with Admiral von Blumdorff, as a sort of envoy. Let me get to the bottom of this before we attack them."

The saturnine Earth President, Jules Debuc, spoke now for the first time. "Frantor's proposal is reasonable, at least. It shall be done. Are there any objections?"

There were none, though Heersen scowled and snorted angrily. Thus, a week later, Karl Frantor accompanied the space armada of Earth when it set off for the inner planet.

IT WAS a strange Venus that greeted Karl after his five year's absence. It was still its old soaking self, its old dreary, monotony of white and gray, its scattering of domed cities—and yet how different.

Where before the haughty Terrestrials had moved in disdainful splendor among the cowering Venusians, now the natives maintained undisputed sway. *Aphrodopolis* was a native city entirely, and in the office of the former governor sat—Antil.

Karl eyed him doubtfully, scarcely knowing what to say. "I rather thought you might be king-pin," he managed at length. "You—the pacifist."

"The choice was not mine. It was that of circumstance," Antil replied. "But you! I did not expect *you* to be your planet's spokesman."

"It was to me that you made your silly threat years ago, and so it is I who was most pessimistic concerning your rebellion. I come, you see, not unaccompanied." His hand motioned vaguely upward where spaceships lazed motionless and threatening.

"You come to menace me?"

"No! To hear your aims and your terms."

"That is easily accomplished. Venus demands its independence and its acceptance by Earth as an equal and sovereign power. In return, we promise friendship, together with free and unrestricted trade."

"And you expect us to accept all that without a struggle?"

"I hope you do—for Earth's own sake."

Karl scowled and threw himself back in his chair in annoyance, "For God's sake, Antil, the time for mysterious hints and bogeys has passed. Show your hand. How did you overcome *Aphrodopolis* and the other cities so easily."

"We were forced to it, Karl.

We did not desire it." Antil's voice was shrill with agitation. "They would not accept our fair terms of surrender and began to shoot their Tonite guns. We—we had to use the—the weapon. We had to kill most of them afterward—out of mercy."

"I don't follow. What weapon are you talking about?"

"Do you remember that time in the ruins of *Ash-taz-zor*, Karl? The hidden room; the ancient inscription; the five little rods."

Karl nodded somberly. "I thought so, but I wasn't sure."

"It was a horrible weapon, Karl." Antil hurried on as if the mere thought of it were not to be endured. "The ancients discovered it—but never used it. They hid it instead, and why they did not destroy it, I can't imagine. I wish they had destroyed it; I really do. But they didn't and I found it and I must use it—for the good of Venus."

His voice sank to a whisper, but with a manifest effort he nerved himself to the task of explanation. "The little harmless rods you saw then, Karl, were capable of producing a force field of some unknown nature (the ancients wisely refused to be explicit there) which has the power of disconnecting brain from mind."

"What?" Karl stared in open-mouthed surprise. "What *are* you talking about?"

"Why, you must know that the brain is merely the *seat* of the mind, and not the mind itself. The nature of "mind" is a mystery, unknown even to our ancients; but whatever it is, it uses the brain as its intermediary to the world of matter." *

"I see. And your weapon divorces mind from brain—renders mind helpless—a space-pilot without his controls."

Antil nodded solemnly. "Have you ever seen a decerebrated animal?" he asked suddenly.

"Why, yes, a dog—in my bio course back in college."

"Come, then, I will show you a decerebrated human."

KARL followed the Venusian to an elevator. As he shot downward to the lowest level—the prison level—his mind was in a turmoil. Torn between horror and fury, he had alternate impulses of unreasoning desire to escape and almost insuperable yearnings to slay the Venusian at his side. In a daze, he left the cubicle and followed Antil down a gloomy corridor, winding its way between rows of tiny, barred cells.

"There." Antil's voice roused

*The brain may be likened to an immensely-complex pilot-room which contains the machinery that controls the body. The mind is then the intelligence or entity that manipulates that machinery.—Author.

Karl as would a sudden stream of cold water. He followed the pointing webbed hand and stared in fascinated revulsion at the human figure revealed.

It was human, undoubtedly, in form—but inhuman, nevertheless. It (Karl could not imagine it as “he”) sat dumbly on the floor, large staring eyes never leaving the blank wall before him. Eyes that were empty of soul, loose lips from which saliva drooled, fingers that moved aimlessly. Nauseated, Karl turned his head hastily.

“He is not exactly decerebrated.” Antil’s voice was low. “Organically, his brain is perfect and unharmed. It is merely—disconnected.”

“How does it live, Antil? Why doesn’t it die?”

“Because the autonomic system is untouched. Stand him up and he will remain balanced. Push him and he will regain his balance. His heart beats. He breathes. If you put food in his mouth, he will swallow, though he would die of starvation before performing the voluntary act of eating food that has been placed before him. It is life—of a sort; but it were better dead, for the disconnection is permanent.”

“It is horrible—horrible.”

“It is worse than you think. I feel convinced that somewhere within that shell of humanity, the mind, unharmed, still exists.

Imprisoned helplessly in a body it cannot control, what must be that mind’s torture?”

Karl stiffened suddenly. “You shan’t overcome Earth by sheer unspeakable brutality. It is an unbelievably cruel weapon but no more deadly than any of a dozen of ours. You shall pay for this.”

“Please, Karl, you have no conception of one-millionth of the deadliness of the ‘Disconnection Field.’ The Field is independent of space, and perhaps of time, too, so that its range can be extended almost indefinitely. Do you know that it required merely one discharge of the weapon to render every warm-blooded creature in *Aphrodispolis* helpless?” Antil’s voice rose tensely. “Do you know that I am able to bathe ALL EARTH in the Field—to render all your teeming billions the duplicate of that dead-alive hulk in there AT ONE STROKE.”

KARL did not recognize his own voice as he rasped, “Fiend! Are you the only one who knows the secret of this damnable Field?”

Antil burst into a hollow laugh, “Yes, Karl, the blame rests on me, alone. Yet killing me will not help. If I die, there are others who know where to find the inscription, others who have not my sympathy for Earth. I am

perfectly safe from you, Karl, for my death would be the end of your world."

The Earthman was broken—utterly. Not a fragment of doubt as to the Venusian's power was left within him. "I yield," he muttered, "I yield. What shall I tell my people?"

"Tell them of my terms, and of what I could do if I wished."

Karl shrank from the Venusian as if his very touch was death, "I will tell them that."

"Tell them also, that Venus is not vindictive. We do not wish to use our weapon, for it is too dreadful to use. If they will give us our independence on our own terms, and allow us certain wise precautions against future re-enslavement, we will hurl each of our five guns and the explanatory inscription explaining it into the sun."

The Terrestrial's voice did not change from its toneless whisper. "I will tell them that."

ADMIRAL von Blumdorff was as Prussian as his name, and his military code was the simple one of brute force. So it was quite natural that his reactions to Karl's report were explosive in their sarcastic derision.

"You forsaken fool," he raved at the young man. "This is what comes of talk, of words, of tomfoolery. You *dare* come back to me with this old-wives' tale of

mysterious weapons, of untold force. Without any proof at all, you accept all that this damned Greenie tells you at absolute face value, and surrender abjectly. Couldn't *you* threaten, couldn't *you* bluff, couldn't *you* lie?"

"He didn't threaten, bluff, or lie," Karl answered warmly. "What he said was the gospel truth. If you had seen the de-cerebrated man—"

"Bah! That is the most inexcusable part of the whole cursed business. To exhibit a lunatic to you, some perfectly normal mental defective, and to say, 'This is our weapon!' and for you to accept that without question! Did they do anything but talk? Did they demonstrate the weapon? Did they even show it to you?"

"Naturally not. The weapon is deadly. They're not going to kill a Venusian to satisfy me. As for showing me the weapon—well, would *you* show your ace-in-the-hole to the enemy? Now you answer *me* a few questions. Why is Antil so cocksure of himself? How did he conquer all Venus so easily?"

"I can't explain it, I admit, but does that prove that *theirs* is the correct explanation? Anyhow, I'm sick of this talk. We're attacking now, and to hell with theories. I'll face them with Tonnite projectiles and you can watch their bluff backfire in their ugly faces."

"But, Admiral, you *must* communicate my report to the President."

"I will—after I blow *Aphrodopolis* into kingdom come."

He turned on the central broadcasting unit. "Attention, all ships! Battle formation! We dive at *Aphrodopolis* with all Tonites blasting in fifteen minutes." Then he turned to the orderly. "Have Captain Larsen inform *Aphrodopolis* that they have fifteen minutes to hoist the white flag."

The minutes that ticked by after that were tense and nerve-racking for Karl Frantor. He sat in bent silence, head buried in his hands and the faint click of the chronometer at the end of every minute sounded like a thunder-clap in his ears. He counted those clicks in a mumbling whisper—8—9—10. God! Only five minutes to certain death! Or *was* it certain death? Was von Blumdorff right? Were the Venusians putting over a daring bluff?

An orderly catapulted into the room and saluted. "The Greenies have just answered, sir."

"Well," von Blumdorff leaned forward eagerly.

"They say, 'Urgently request fleet not to attack. If done, we shall not be responsible for the consequences.'"

"Is that all?" came the outraged shout.

"Yes, sir."

The Admiral burst into a sulphurous stream of profanity. "Why, the infernal gall of them," he shouted. "They dare bluff to the very end."

And as he finished, the fifteenth minute clicked off, and the mighty armada burst into motion. In streaking, orderly flight they shot down toward the cloudy shroud of the second planet. Von Blumdorff grinned in a grisly appreciation of the awesome view spread over the televisor—until the mathematically precise battle formation suddenly broke.

THE Admiral stared and rubbed his eyes. The entire further half of the fleet had suddenly gone crazy. First, the ships wavered; then they veered and shot off at mad angles.

Then calls came in from the sane half of the fleet—reports that the left wing had ceased to respond to radio.

The attack on *Aphrodopolis* was immediately disrupted as the order went out to capture the ships that had run amok. Von Blumdorff stamped up and down and tore his hair. Karl Frantor cried out dully, "It is their weapon," and lapsed back into his former silence.

From *Aphrodopolis* came no word at all.

For two solid hours the rem-

nant of the Terrestrial fleet battled their own ships. Following the aimless courses of the stricken vessels, they approached and grappled. Bound together then by rigid force, rocket blasts were applied until the insane flight of the others had been balanced and stopped. Fully twenty of the fleet were never caught; some continuing on some orbit about the sun, some shooting off into unknown space, a few crashing down to Venus.

When the remaining ships of the left wing were boarded, the unsuspecting boarding parties stopped short in horror. *Seventy-five staring, witless shells of humanity in each ship.* Not a single human being left.

Some of the first to enter screamed in horror and fled in a panic. Others merely retched and turned away their eyes. One officer took in the situation at a glance, calmly drew his Atomopistol and rayed every decerebrate in sight.

Admiral von Blumdorff was a stricken man; a pitiful, limp wreck of his former proud and blustering self, when he heard the worst. One of the decerebrates was brought to him, and he reeled back.

Karl Frantor gazed at him with red-rimmed eyes. "Well, Admiral, are you satisfied?"

But the Admiral made no answer. He drew his gun, and be-

fore anyone could stop him, shot himself through the head.

ONCE again Karl Frantor stood before a meeting of the President and his Cabinet, before a dispirited, frightened group of men. His report was definite and left no doubt as to the course that must now be followed.

President Debuc stared at the decerebrate brought in as an exhibit. "We are finished," he said. "We must surrender unconditionally, throw ourselves upon their mercy. But someday—" his eyes kindled in retribution.

"No, Mr. President!" Karl's voice rang out, "there shall be no someday. We must give the Venusians their simple due—liberty and independence. Bygones must be bygones—our dead have but paid for the half-century of Venusian slavery. After this, there must be a new order in the Solar System—the birth of a new day."

The President lowered his head in thought and then raised it again. "You are right," he answered with decision; "there shall be no thought of revenge."

Two months later the peace treaty was signed and Venus became what it has remained ever since—an independent and sovereign power. And with the signing of the treaty, a whirling speck shot out toward the sun. It was—the weapon too dreadful to use.

John Keely's Perpetual Motion Machine

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

The latest in Mr. Silverberg's very entertaining exposes, this time clearly demonstrating that sometimes (as in the case of Mr. John Worrell Keely, who found luxury in a glass of water) there seems to be no end to the making and spending of money—someone else's, that is.

IT'S a universal human desire to want to get something for nothing. Unfortunately, just about everything worthwhile turns out to have some sort of price tag—especially the power needed to run a motor. That hasn't stopped inventors from trying, for a good many centuries now, to get something for nothing by inventing a "perpetual motion" machine. Such a machine is not intended to go on moving for ever, as the name might imply. Rather, its purpose

is to do useful work without drawing on an external energy source; or, at the very least, to give off more energy than is needed to run it.

Modern physics casts a doubtful eye on such an enterprise. The first law of thermodynamics holds that it's impossible to create energy, and no one has yet managed to find a loophole in that law. Such seeming perpetual-motion machines as have been built all turn out to have some secret power source, or to

be drawing on energy in some way that perhaps even the inventor does not realize.

The laws of thermodynamics, though, are simply the result of centuries of observation, and clever men have entertained sneaking hopes that there might somewhere be an exception to them. Most of the early perpetual motion machines depended on gravity to generate energy. One type consisted of a closed wheel divided by spokes into compartments, each compartment containing a weighted ball. The idea was that once the wheel was given a starting push, the weight of the balls would keep it turning indefinitely. Eventually, though, energy lost through friction tends to slow the wheel down and halt it—requiring another push to get it going again.

AS early as the thirteenth century a Parisian architect observed, "Many a time have skillful workmen tried to contrive a wheel that shall turn of itself," and he suggested a way to do it by weighting it with quicksilver or with "an uneven number of mallets." Leonardo da Vinci apparently experimented along these lines several hundred years later without results. In the seventeenth century, the Marquis of Worcester built an elaborate wheel fourteen feet across, weighted by metal balls

of fifty pounds apiece; A German inventor a century later built a similar device. But in neither case was perpetual motion achieved.

A mill turned by water-power is a classic producer of energy. But the mill will turn only so long as the millstream is flowing; in order to get energy out of the system, energy must go in. A number of inventors tackled the problem of constructing a re-cycling mill system; water would run past the mill's wheel, making it turn, and then somehow would be lifted back to its starting point to turn the wheel again. Alas, the lifting process required energy, too.

Many other ingenious-sound-gadgets were designed, based on this principle and that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. All of them foundered on the same point: No matter what method was used to keep the motor going, that method demanded energy in some fashion itself.

And then a clever Yankee named John Worrell Keely came along in 1872 and showed the world how it could be done. Keely proposed to use the energy of atoms as his power source. Nobody in 1872—least of all Keely—knew anything about the phenomenon we call "radioactivity," which makes possible the release of energy from heavy elements like uranium. He meant to draw

energy from simpler substances—such as water.

All atoms, Keely said, were in constant vibration (which is true); the trick was to harness and channel this random vibration. Keely claimed to be able to make atoms in a given substance vibrate in harmony. He could then draw on the “etheric force” of these vibrating atoms to run any motor of any size. To seek funds for his invention, Keely went on a lecture tour. The great discovery, he declared, had its origin when he picked up a violin and fiddled a few notes. The notes set in motion harmonic vibrations, and he saw in a flash how the vibrations of atoms could be used to create energy.

HE set up the Keely Motor Company in New York and held a meeting at the plush Fifth Avenue Hotel. It was attended by bankers, businessmen, engineers, lawyers—a group of wealthy, adventurous individuals looking for a good investment. This was an era when great fortunes were being made in America by sharp-witted men. John D. Rockefeller was building his billion-dollar oil empire; Jay Gould, the Vanderbilts, E. H. Harriman and others were earning millions from their railroad operations; Andrew Carnegie was growing rich manufacturing steel. Miraculous inventions were just around the

corner: Bell and his telephone, Edison and his electric light, phonograph, motion pictures. The Wright Brothers were dreaming of airplanes. Other men sought ways to build gasoline-powered “horseless carriages.” And here was John Worrell Keely, offering a fantastic new source of power!

Investors flocked to his side. The day after his first meeting at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, Worrell was given \$10,000 to continue his research, with the assurance that more funds would be forthcoming. He had awed his audience with phrases like “quadruple negative harmonics,” “etheric disintegration,” and “atomic triplets.” He explained that his machine was a “hydro-pneumatic, pulsating vacuum engine,” which was hooked up to a device he called a “liberator.” The “liberator” was a series of highly sensitive tuning forks, whose vibrations disintegrated air and water, liberating “etheric force” of great power.

Keely had brought along a model of his vacuum engine. He poured a glass of water into its intake, and moments later the engine rumbled to life. A gauge attached to it showed that a pressure of 50,000 pounds per square inch had been created. The audience gasped as etheric force ripped thick cables apart, bent iron bars, fired bullets through

foot-deep planks. Keely reeled off the wonders of his invention:

"With these three agents alone [air, water, and machine], unaided by any and every compound, heat electricity and galvanic action, I have produced in an unappreciable time by a simple manipulation of the machine a vaporic substance at one expulsion of a volume of ten gallons having an elastic energy of 10,000 pounds to the square inch. . . . It has a vapor of so fine an order it will penetrate metal. . . . It is lighter than hydrogen and more powerful than steam or any explosives known. . . . I once drove an engine 800 revolutions a minute of forty horsepower with less than a thimbleful of water and kept it running fifteen days with the same water."

This, obviously, was not the same old "perpetual motion" that all intelligent people knew was an impossibility. Keely was not depending on such hopeless methods as weighted wheels or endlessly cycling water. A man had only to look in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to find out why those devices could not work. No, Keely had something brand new—etheric force; and the stockholders of the Keely Motor Company quietly congratulated themselves for their perceptive natures. They all knew that John W. Keely was going to make them millionaires.

With his financial backing assured Keely set up a laboratory at 1420 North Twentieth Street in Philadelphia. Money poured in, and he began to build full-scale machines. Within two years—on November 10, 1874—Keely was showing off to a proud group of stockholders his first "vibratory generator." This was a preliminary model for an even more ambitious machine, which he would spend the next fourteen years on. A newspaperman who attended the 1874 demonstration wrote that the generator operated "out of a bath tub from which a stream of water, passing through a goose-quill, sets the entire contrivance in motion."

THE years went by. Keely toiled on. The Keely Motor Company showed no profits and paid no dividends, but Keely explained that he was still deep in research and development. Some of the stockholders were restless. By now, Bell's telephone was in public use; Edison had produced wonder after profitable wonder; the first sputtering automobiles were chugging down highways at a hesitant pace; but their hero had not yet put his invention into commercial use. From time to time, of course, Keely required new funds for "further research." The stockholders usually obliged. Fresh capital came into the company too, from men

anxious to get in on the eventual bonanza.

One of Keely's most enthusiastic backers was Mrs. Clara Jessup Bloomfield-Moore. Whenever the other stockholders fretted at the lack of results, Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore urged them to have faith. She wrote glowing articles about Keely that appeared in the most widely read magazines of the day. In one, she said that Keely's etheric force was "like the sun behind the clouds, the source of all light though itself unseen. It is the latent basis of all human knowledge. . . ."

As president of the Company, Keely found it necessary to live in high style. It would not do, he told them, for the head of such an important enterprise to dress shabbily, to ride in broken-down carriages, or to live in a squalid house. They agreed. So a good deal of the investors' money went into Keely's own pockets. The rest was spent on ever more complex machinery.

HIS new prize was a "shifting resonator"—an affair of wires, tubes and adhesive plates enclosed in a hollow brass sphere. This was linked by a series of wires to the famous motor itself, and to a transmitter that bristled with steel rods. The resonator, Keely explained, carried seven different kinds of vibration, each "being capable of infinitesimal

division." Keely would set the whole contraption going in a variety of ways: sometimes by playing a few notes on his violin, sometimes with a zither or a harmonica, sometimes by striking an ordinary tuning fork. Whatever the method, etheric force came forth, starting the motor. The motor itself was a sturdy iron hoop encircling a drum with eight spokes. When etheric force began to radiate, the big drum would begin to spin rapidly—dramatic testimony to the power of Keely's machine.

Keely declined to take out any patents on his masterpiece, however. Some of the stockholders were worried by this. Should he not protect their rights with a patent? No, Keely said. A patent application would have to contain the essential information about the workings of his invention. But the invention, though it obviously worked, was not quite ready for commercial development. Keely told the investors he feared some unscrupulous person might study his patent application, steal his basic ideas, adapt them in some slightly different form, and beat the Keely Motor Company to the market. It was far better, he insisted, to keep every detail of the project a secret until the grand moment arrived when etheric force could be put to money-making use. Otherwise there was a good chance

that the investment of the stockholders, and Keely's long years of toil, would all go for nothing.

By this time, many scientists and engineers wanted to know how Keely's wonderful motor worked. Keely's refusal to explain his methods was suspect. Other engineers began to wonder about the possibilities of a hoax. Was there some way of duplicating Keely's results through known techniques?

In 1884, the magazine *Scientific American* ran an article describing a series of experiments aimed at discrediting Keely. Everything that Keely had done, the magazine said, could be duplicated using compressed air as the source of energy. Did Keely have a compressed-air supply hidden somewhere near his motor? Keely sidestepped the attacks. The other engineers, he told his backers, were petty, envious men. Unable to solve his challenge, they were reduced to trying to pull him down to their level. He reminded them how scoffers had laughed at the inventor of the steamship, the telegraph, the telephone. Every startling new advance, Keely said, was accompanied by this sort of sniping.

The hubbub died down. Keely went on experimenting, his secret undivulged. Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore, though her loyalty to Keely remained unshaken, came

to him with a suggestion. Perhaps, she said, Keely ought to take Thomas Edison in as a partner and confide the secret to him. Edison was the world's most famous inventor; nobody dared to sneer at *him* any more. If Edison lent his great prestige to the Keely Motor Company, it would mean an end to the attacks on Keely himself. Keely refused to hear of the idea. He would tell his secret to no one—certainly not to Edison. He had no need for another man's prestige, he insisted. Those who attacked him today would praise him wildly tomorrow. And he went on building ever more grandiose machines.

HE printed a mysterious chart, as occult as anything ever drawn by a medieval astrologer, and handed it to his long-suffering investors. It showed overlapping circles, cones of radiating lines, various oddly-shaped figures, and a series of musical notations. Supposedly, the secret of the etheric vibrations was contained in the chart. Many of the stockholders framed their copies and displayed them with great satisfaction. What did it all mean? No one knew. But it looked terribly significant.

By 1898 Keely had kept his company running for 26 years without putting a product on the market. It had not earned a penny in all that time. An army

of investors had thrown hundreds of thousands of dollars into the Keely Motor Company, enabling its president and founder to live a luxurious life while building his vibrators and liberators and generators. From year to year, he performed his delicate juggling act with the stockholders, and they believed him. Then, in 1898, Keely died. And his secret died with him, the horrified investors found. For nowhere had he set down any clue to the workings of his motor.

Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore followed him to the grave soon afterward. Upon her death, her son, Clarence B. Moore, rented the building that had housed Keely's laboratory. Clarence Moore had been forced to stand by helplessly for years while his mother showered Keely with cash; now he wanted to see just what the fast-talking inventor had been up to. Moore got together an investigating group consisting of a well-known electrical engineer and two professors from the University of Pennsylvania. They prowled through Keely's building. The liberators and generators and other apparatus had been carried away by Keely's supporters. But the secret of the mystery still remained.

THE investigators found a three-ton steel globe hidden in the cellar. It had an opening on

its upper surface. Pipes and tubes lay nearby. It looked much like a compressed-air device—just as the *Scientific American* article had guessed in 1884!

Moore and his associates ripped up the flooring of the room in which Keely had conducted his demonstrations. Brass tubes ran down through cunningly designed holes in the walls, to the cellar—leading to the giant steel globe. The secret was out. Keely's motor *had* been powered by gusts of compressed air rising from the globe in the cellar. Perhaps he had controlled the apparatus by using a foot-operated pedal in the floor. When he picked up his violin or harmonica to create the "harmonic vibrations," that supposedly triggered the motor, he might well have tapped on the pedal—as though beating time with his foot.

For a quarter of a century Keely's financial backers had solemnly swallowed his brand of hokum. They did not change their minds now. They refused to accept Clarence Moore's expose. Moore was "embittered," they declared, because his mother had invested heavily in Keely's company against his own wishes. He had deliberately set out to smear the dead Keely.

No one talks of etheric force today, and we have more effective ways of getting energy out of

atoms. But the strange thing about John Worrell Keely is that he had an undeniable knack for gadgetry. If he had so chosen, he might perhaps have made a real contribution to technology employing compressed air—which eventually came to have considerable industrial use. His years of

research might have produced something of true benefit. Instead, he hoodwinked a group of gullible money-hungry investors. They got no more than they deserved. And Keely, who might have been another Edison, is known only in America's gallery of rogues.

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AUGUST 1965

The Good Seed

By ARTHUR PORGES

*Will the ingenious mind of Ensign De Ruyter never falter?
Will the crew of the scout-ship Herschel ever stop falling into stupid traps? Read on, read on.*

IT was gloomy in the cavern. The only light came from a heavy metal grill set deep in the rocky roof. One would expect the dark, underground prison to be chilly as well, but it was hot—and dry. Very dry, like the whole planet *Virchow*. That was a vital point, for the three condemned men had only a gallon of water to last them thirty days. Obviously, they could not survive.

"I would understand such behavior on the part of De Ruyter here," Captain Morse said in a frosty voice. "But for you, Lieutenant, an experienced officer—and married, besides—to make such a mistake—!" He broke off as if unable to express his disapproval in strong enough terms.

"I was framed," Burton said bitterly. "All I did was kiss the

little devil; she was begging for it."

"You knew the women here are taboo," Morse snapped.

"Yes, but—"

"I know. It was dark, and you thought nobody was around. Only the Chief and a million witnesses, all waiting for the fatal smack!"

"I'm sure it was all rigged," Ensign De Ruyter said, coming to the lieutenant's defense. "And we all know why. The Duranganni are furious because we wouldn't agree to bring them weapons to use against that other country—the, what was it? The Gorbisti people over the mountain range."

"That's right," Morse said. "Which is why Burton should have been doubly careful. They were aching for an excuse to murder us. These Duranganni are not

like the people on *Faraday*, or those Buddhist characters, or the Nardim bunch De Ruyter foxed with an urn. All those were primitives, but basically human. These damned Duranganni have always been mean and cruel. That hairlessness of theirs is a giveaway. They are much closer to the reptile branch of the evolutionary complex than the other savages. I don't mind monsters, but between us, I don't go for people who are nearly human—and these are, except for being so squat and hairless—in appearance, but callous as lower animals."

"They're awfully strong, too," the ensign said. "Funny, since they don't show any muscles to speak of."

"Neither does a leopard, compared to a weight-lifter, all knots and bulges," Burton pointed out. "But pussy can flip a weight around that would break the weight-lifter's back."

"I don't like the calculated cruelty, either," the Captain said. "I can understand a primitive tribe cutting us down. But this business of locking us up for thirty days with plenty of food—if you call raw grain food; must be a fifty pound sack there—and a miserable pot of water that wouldn't keep one man alive a week; well, that gets me!"

"Surely they know there will be reprisals," De Ruyter said.

"Ever read about the delinquent children of the late twentieth century?" the lieutenant said. "They had a kind of special status under the law—young people did. So naturally they learned to take advantage of it. A boy would do something bad, and practically tell the policeman, You can't do much to me; I'm a minor. Knowing he had the odds with him, a delinquent was usually ready to take a chance."

BURTON'S point is," Morse said, "that the Duranganni are in a similarly strong position. They know by now that the Galactic Council opposes the kind of punishment of primitives that was used ages ago by Americans against Red Indians, or English against African tribes. In the past, of course, such treatment was often more of a provocation than a reprisal; but even when justified, if ever, the Council's against it. This isn't the first time the Duranganni have made trouble. They'll escape with a fine, or the Chief will pick a scapegoat from among his enemies on the Elders' Bench and blame him. Hell, they might even claim we went off into the hills and disappeared. Who's going to prove they're lying?"

"Too right," Burton admitted. Then, with that perverse humor so characteristic of him—and of the captain—and which had so

often made De Ruyter wonder, he said solemnly, "As a devout Muggletonian, to whom it is given to curse and spare not, I say, 'Cursed are the heathen that inhabit this land; may the plagues of Egypt light upon them, and the seven vials rain down their contents upon them! May their names be a hissing and an abomination! Roaring lions are their princes, ravening wolves are their judges; their priests have polluted the sanctuary! May their flesh consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes consume away in their holes, and their tongues consume away in their mouths, and may there be mourning among them, even as the mourning of Haddrimmon in the valley of Megiddon!'"

"Bee-rother!" De Ruyter breathed. "Is that how Muggletonians let off steam?"

"I follow the saintly Ludovick Muggleton, and the saintlier John Reeve, of whom Ludovick is but the mouthpiece, even as Aaron was of Moses. They are the two witnesses of the Apocalypse. They are the two olive trees and the two candlesticks. To them and to their followers—meaning me—it is given to curse and to spare not, to prophesy against the peoples and kindred and nations—like these infernal Duranganni—whereon is set the Seal of the Beast. Cursed be they all! Surely

they shall be as Sodom and Gomorrah, even the breeding of salt-pits and a perpetual desolation!"

"Amen!" Captain Morse said, grinning. Then he added in a dry voice, "Now that you've prayed so eloquently, let's remember that God helps those who help themselves. In short, gentlemen, we'd better take stock and figure a way out of this catacomb."

"There's one point in our favor," the ensign said. "They've made the whole area taboo for thirty days—after which they hope to come for our remains. So we have the place to ourselves, and needn't worry about disturbing the neighbors with our noise. And once out, the ship's still okay, and only we know how to get in—I hope!"

"Nobody else here can handle the coded outside controls; that's a safe bet," Burton said. "But you neglected to mention how we get out to make use of our little secret."

"I can't understand where such a pretty girl came from," De Ruyter wondered aloud, a complete change of subject that made the lieutenant stare for a moment, then wink at Morse. "The others here look like—like those fat Japanese wrestlers; I forget the name; Suomi, or something. But Clarin is lovely. . . ."

"You didn't do your homework, Ensign," the Captain said. "Obviously she belongs to those other

people across the range. According to the records—which you were supposed to peek at—the Gorbisti are a lot more like us, except for a purple tinge of the skin, which neither of you noticed, apparently. Too many other points of interest—all curved!”

DE RUYTER, his face red, quickly reverted to the previous, far more important, discussion.

“Maybe we should check the grille,” he said. “It might not be as tough as it looks.”

“As good a place to start as any,” Morse agreed. “I’m the lightest, so if you two will get on your hands and knees, I can put a foot on each aching back, and reach the opening.”

They took the suggested position, and he stood on the two men. After examining the grille, he pushed with all his strength, to the accompaniment of groans and profane objections from his supporters. Then he tugged, lifting himself off their backs.

“Not a prayer,” he said grimly, dropping to the floor of the chamber. “We’d need our screw-jack to force that grille.”

“But what’s she doing in *this* country?” the boy asked plaintively.

“Who?” Morse demanded, then he said: “Oh, you mean the girl, Clarin. You have a grass-

hopper mind, Ensign.”

“She was probably captured in a raid, as a child,” the lieutenant said. “Then they raise ’em as their own. Both sides do it, according to report. She’s not a slave, but just a second-class member of the community.”

“The Chief, or that rat-faced pet Elder of his, was shrewd enough to know she’d be better bait than one of their own blimps,” the captain said. “And how right he was!”

“If this was a story,” De Ruyter said, “she’d sneak up here and open the door.”

“Well, it isn’t,” Morse snapped. “So let’s tackle the door ourselves.”

Not very hopefully, for they had some notion of its quality, they converged on it. The door was heavy, dense wood, like the best mahogany, and as they recalled when it was open, about three inches thick. In addition, it was studded with a great many knobs. And it was a discouragingly good fit, mating with solid stone on all four edges.

The only weak point in its design, if it could be called that, was the placement of the hinges. They were of a bronze or brass alloy, strong and massive. The halves on the wall of the cavern were held by sturdy bolts set deep into the stone; and those on the door by large screws, tightly driven into the wood.

The hinge pin, which passed through both hinges, was a hollow metal tube of the same alloy, and about four feet long. It was closed at the bottom, and had a thick flange on the top, which was open. The flange prevented anybody from pushing the pin through the hinges, and so freeing the door. The pin was about two inches in diameter—inside measurement—and perhaps a quarter of an inch thick.

"That's the only part we have any hope of forcing or tearing," Morse said, rapping the tube with his knuckles. But they did not leave us a thing to work with. They even took my watch."

"That was plunder, not disarmament," Burton said. "I saw him put it on his wrist—the Chief, I mean."

"Let's hope he's wearing it when the relief ship comes," De Ruyter said viciously.

"He won't be," the Captain assured him. "Unless he claims to have found it on our bodies. No, he won't do that, because they'd take it away for my wife. He'll stash it away until they go."

"I wish I'd been a little faster with my Markov," the boy said. "In another tenth of a second I'd have blasted the Elder; he was right in line."

"You were fast enough," Burton said. "Just a hair behind the skipper, and he's Fleet Champion. But they jumped us too sud-

denly, and they're supposed to be friendly at the moment. Me, I prefer enemies if this is friendly treatment!"

"We were too hasty," Morse said. "It was wrong even to try getting in a shot."

"If we're going to die here," the ensign said stubbornly, "I don't mind breaking that rule for once. I'd like to take the Chief and that Elder along. Let them reprimand me," he added, "posthumously; I don't mind!"

"Grille out; door out," the Captain muttered. "We'll have to look in the pit."

"Oh, Lord," Burton said. "It's full of bones, and the air down there would horrify a rispa-bird." The rispa-bird is a kind of vulture from the planet *Bewick*; it will eat anything, but prefers the most loathsome morsels that ever revolted a terrestrial buzzard.

"I intend to have a peek, anyhow," Morse said coldly. "If there's one chance in a million of finding something useful there—a strong stick, a metal bar, a rusty knife—we can't pass it up."

"It's my turn," the lieutenant said. "I'll go down."

"Toss you," De Ruyter suggested.

"There's nothing to toss," Burton reminded him. "Bare rock on all sides. You'd think they had the place dusted every day, like a fancy sitting room."

"You can stop arguing," the Captain told them. "I'm still the smallest. You'll have to form a kind of chain to get me in and out, and either of you two elephants wouldn't make it."

That settled the matter. He was logical—and he was in command.

THE pit was at the back of the chamber. Whether it was a natural extension of the prison-cavern, or had been hewn from the rock, they didn't know. The mouth was roughly circular, however, which suggested it had been modified, at least.

"Not much light down there," Morse said, looking up at the grille in annoyance. "Getting late in the day. I think if Burton braces himself here, and holds you by the belt, you can let me down," he told De Ruyter. "The bottom's not more than fifteen feet away."

The set-up proved feasible, and Morse dropped lightly to the floor of the pit, there to grope and swear among the charnel remains. It was a highly unpleasant chore, but the captain didn't shirk it; duty was his creed, and whatever had to be done in its name, he did as well as possible, forcing himself to ignore the stench and other horrors as he searched the gloomy place thoroughly. They heard him give one grunt of satisfaction, but there were no more.

Finally, he ordered them to help him out, so the ensign leaned far down, with Burton clinging to his belt. Morse leaped lithely up to grasp the boy's hands, and was pulled over the edge.

"Find anything?" the lieutenant demanded eagerly.

"Only this." The Captain held out a length of metal, a flat strap of alloy measuring about a foot.

"Good!" De Ruyter said.

"Not good enough, I'm afraid," Morse said. "It has no point and no edge. It's just a light hammer or possibly pry-bar at best. Man, I could do with a drink." And he cast a longing look at the ceramic jar that held their one precious gallon of water.

"Maybe it's time we all had a sip," Burton suggested, but the captain shook his head.

"Tomorrow—not even then, if we can hold out."

De Ruyter pulled the metal bar gently from Morse's hand, walked to the door, and gave one of the hinges a mighty whack. There was a vibrant ring like the sound of a Chinese gong.

"Hey!" the Captain roared. "Don't do that. They could hear that much noise in the village, and the taboo won't keep our friend the Chief away if he thinks we're escaping."

"But how can we do anything?" the boy complained.

"Anything quiet. Pry or dig or scrape—that's all."

The ensign made a few trials, then said glumly: "It won't work. It's barely possible we could pound off the flange in a week, and slip the hinge pin down; but the metal can't be pried, that's certain; too tough for this thin strap you found."

Burton wandered moodily over to the grain sack, opened the top, peered in, and groaned.

"I might've guessed it! Beans, and I never could digest the damn things even cooked—and these are raw. What kind of food is that?"

"The idea, you'll recall, is that if we're innocent, the gods will keep us alive for thirty days," Morse said. "The beans and water are not supposed to be important. At least, that's the theory. The Chief doesn't expect to find us breathing, I'm sure. Incidentally, maybe these aren't like earth beans; maybe you can eat 'em."

"They seem identical," was the disgusted retort. "Beans are beans, blast the luck!"

DE RUYTER joined him, took a handful, and with a wry face, chewed several.

"They taste like regular navies," he said. "And not bad—or else I'm hungrier than I realized."

"Better lay off," Burton warned him. "You'll blow up like a balloon. I know, believe me."

THE GOOD SEED

"I doubt that," the Captain said. "Not without water, and he's not about to get any today."

The ensign was standing in a queerly awkward position, his face blank. He looked down at the beans in his palm, and his eyes suddenly grew bright.

"I'll be a silly Saturnian sillidor!" he said, in a near-whisper.

"Not on duty you won't," Burton said. "What's biting you now?" Then his own eyes lit up. "Captain, what'll you bet our boy's got another bright idea? Spill it, De Ruyter; I'm all ears."

"Don't know that I'd go that far," Morse said, peering ostentatiously at the lieutenant's nose, which suggested the prow of a ship.

"I don't dare suggest it," the boy said. "It would mean gambling most of our water."

"The hell with that," the Captain said promptly. "That one gallon isn't going to help us much no matter what. Let's hear what you're thinking."

"These beans," De Ruyter said. "If they're like navies at all, what do you figure would happen if we soaked a few pounds? I remember once," he said, "going camping in a wilderness area back home. Real primitive stuff, like in the early days, even before rocket-ships. We had some beans, and didn't know too much about cooking them. Anyhow, they were in a thick akryl jar,

and somehow water got in— heavy rain, I think. Well, believe it or not, they swelled up and broke that tough jar right open. Come to think of it, most seeds are like that; they'll sprout right through concrete, even, I've read somewhere."

"Read?" Burton snapped. "I've seen it on my own driveway often enough—damned weeds!"

"I don't follow this," Morse said in a gentle voice. "Just where will this swelling take place, and how will it help us?"

"The hinge-pin," De Ruyter said. "It's made to order, I'd guess. Closed at the bottom; open at the top; narrow; kind of rough inside, too, I noticed. If we ram it full, as tight as we can, and then give the beans a good soaking, the tube may split. And if it does—"

"Say no more," the Captain said. "I get the point. You split that pin open, and we've got a chance; no doubt of that."

Eagerly the boy grabbed a handful of beans from the sack, carried them to the tube, and dropped them into the open, flanged end. They could be heard rattling to the bottom. Burton added a couple of huge fistfuls of his own, and even the captain was moved to join the line.

When the tube was full, De Ruyter began mashing the contents down with the metal strap. But it didn't have the weight,

and Burton solemnly handed him a heavy boot. The heel of that made possible the addition of another pound of beans.

The tube having been crammed to the limit, the ensign, glancing at Morse for permission, which was ungrudgingly given, took the water jar, and began trickling liquid down the inside of the pin. As it was absorbed, he added more until the tube was brim-full.

Then the three men sat down and waited. De Ruyter moodily nibbled a few dry beans. Ten minutes later, he inspected the tube, finding to his delight, that the excess of liquid was already absorbed.

"That's a good sign," he said. "They're sopping it up. The pressure must be building."

OVER the next two hours he kept adding more water, and the air became electric with tension. Even if the one gallon was of little use, the thirsty trio hated to see it disappearing down a metal tube instead of their arid gullets.

"I figured," Morse said in a wooden voice, "that we'd have to fool the Chief. I know what thirst can do, and when that gallon was gone, and things got bad, I hoped we'd use our belts on each other." He motioned to his throat. "Last man—meaning me—to find his own way out."

"I agree," his Number One said. "But let's hope it won't come to that. Swelling seeds," he added a bit pompously, "are known to exert enormous force. I remember once—" He broke off, tensing as he sat there. "Listen!"

Through the tomb-like silence of the vault they could hear little creaking noises from the hinge-pin.

"It's feeling the pressure now!" Burton exclaimed through dry lips, his voice a rough croak. "Squeeze away, you beans; I forgive you for what you've done to my plumbing in the past! I just hope," he said fervently, "they don't all ooze out the top."

"They won't," De Ruyter said with a confidence that was partly assumed. "The friction must be tremendous in that narrow, unpolished tube. The vector should be mostly radial."

The pin was groaning loudly now, as the metal protested against the growing strain. There were faint snapping sounds, and once the pin rang like a distant gong.

Then, with a screech of rending alloy that made all three men start, the tube split down the center, vertically, along its four foot length, shooting wet beans over the floor of the cavern.

There was a yell of exultation from the two junior officers, quickly cut short by Morse.

"Quiet!" he grated. "D'you want the Chief coming up here to check?" He went to the door, metal band in hand, and began to pry at the shattered hinge-pin. Now that its integrity as a hollow cylinder was gone, the relatively narrow gauge of the metal made it vulnerable. It began to peel away under the captain's levering.

An hour later they had the door off its hinges. Outside it was getting dark.

"We'll hide until late," Morse said. "Make sure they're all asleep or at least not too alert. Then we'll sneak down to the ship and yoicks and away! But first," he said calmly, "let's put the door back as well as we can, so that from the outside it could pass a casual inspection."

The other two, who would have run the moment they were free, exchanged glances of exasperated admiration. The captain was a cool customer, and rarely goofed on tactics.

THEY took off shortly before dawn, much to the astonishment of the Chief, who lurched out of his hut, bleary-eyed. He wondered, unhappily, about ghosts, witches, or—not being wholly naive—if the *Herschel* had an emergency robot pilot to carry her off when the crew was lost.

"I want to get something off

my chest," De Ruyter said, as they left the planet behind, and prepared for overdrive by space-warping. His face was flushed. "I kissed Clarin myself. But for some reason she didn't set me up like the lieutenant—there were no witnesses. I don't know why."

"I can guess," Morse said, thinking that the boy was about as good-looking and attractive a young fellow as he'd ever met. Burton was a prize hunk of man, too, but youth still calls to youth; Clarin was only sixteen at most; De Ruyter just pushing twenty. The lieutenant, at thirty, was old by comparison. And Morse, at forty-three, must have seemed to her like a man ready for the next world.

He glanced at Burton, and both shook their heads slowly.

"I can't imagine," the lieutenant said.

When De Ruyter left the room, Burton said, "He's our lucky ensign. Better make sure he's never transferred out."

"In that case, we'll have as our junior officer the only admiral in the fleet," Morse said. "This will be his fourth extra commendation, you know."

"Suppress it," Burton said shamelessly. "After all, the kid doesn't know beans about Fleet Tactics."

"All he had to know this time was just beans," the Captain said. Then he gave Burton his singularly warm and luminous smile. "And the boy didn't miss a trick—he even used *navy* beans!"

THE END

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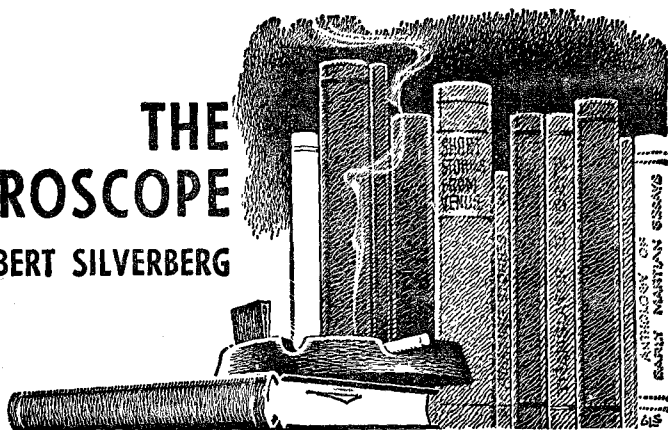
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THE SPECTROSCOPE

By ROBERT SILVERBERG



The War of the Worlds, by H. G. Wells. Airmont Books, 40¢. 128 pages.

The Time Machine, by H. G. Wells. Airmont Books, 40¢. 126 pages.

The War in the Air, In the Days of the Comet, and The Food of the Gods, by H. G. Wells. Dover Books, \$2.00. 645 pages.

The science fiction novels of H. G. Wells, most of them written sixty to seventy years ago, are nearly all in public domain, now, and paperback editions of them are proliferating. It's fine to have Wells in print, for he is in many ways the father of us all. Nearly every theme sounded in modern science fiction was first conceived by Wells, long before Campbell, Heinlein, and Asimov were out of their cradles.

Wells' *The Time Machine*, reprinted here in an attractive Airmont edition, is a case in point. As Donald Wollheim's excellent introduction demonstrates, "Wells foresaw not just inventions but the impact that science would make on social organization and the lives of humanity," and this, his first science fiction novel, is as much "a voyage of wonder and marvel" today as it was when it startled the readers of 1895. Some of the science is unlikely—as when Wells talks of "a sepia painting I had once seen done from the ink of a fossil Bellemnite that must have perished and become fossilized millions of years ago"—but the poetry of his vision is unforgettable.

Less poetic, but equally significant as the forerunner of an entire genre, is 1897's *The War of*

the Worlds, which has lost nothing through age. Airmont's edition is marred by excessively small type, a foolish economy when so many competing editions are available in more legible format.

Dover offers a ponderous paperback omnibus of three lesser-known Wells novels of the 1904-1908 period. By that time, Wells was more interested in social criticism than in prophecy, and he can be seen already verging on the tendentiousness that was to mar his later fiction so badly. *The War in the Air* creaks quite a bit, and its chief value is the amusement of seeing how Wells underestimated the course of modern warfare—though there are startling moments when it is hard to believe that the book was written six years before Sarajevo. *In the Days of the Comet* is more novelistic, less science-fictional, than most of the earlier Wells books; as a novel of character, its technique is outdated, and the s-f aspects are tepid. Finally, *The Food of the Gods*, upper-level Wells, perfectly fulfills the requirement that a good science-fiction story should explore in detail the consequences of a single miraculous premise. In this case, the premise is that a chemical substance can induce spectacular increases in the growth rates of living organisms—with devastating effect on the

social structure of the world.

A Treasury of Science Fiction, edited by Groff Conklin. Berkley Books, 50¢. 192 pages.

Berkley continues to dole out slices of the king-sized Conklin anthologies of fifteen and twenty years ago. This one is a singularly successful slice, too, since its eight stories are of the highest quality.

The story that makes the book indispensable is Jack Williamson's "With Folded Hands" of 1947—the prologue, so to speak, to his novel, *The Humanoids*. When it appeared, its impact was almost revolutionary, for, instead of the traditional pulp finale in which the hero achieves a last-minute triumph over desperate odds, this one simply followed the logic of its premise to an inexorable and shattering conclusion. Though written in stock pulp style ("Get out of here, he rasped bitterly"), it was an epochal event that showed new possibilities in a field shackled by pulp-magazine conventions.

Arthur C. Clarke is on hand with two stories—virtually his first two to be published, in fact. One might say that his later brilliance is there in embryo, except that these stories aren't embryonic; "Loophole" is executed with admirable skill, and "Rescue Party" is impressively visual in its depiction of a future galactic civ-

ilization. Impressive, too, is the word for A. E. van Vogt's little "Juggernaut," and H. F. Heard's "The Great Fog," both of which manage to destroy civilization compactly and swiftly. Henry Kuttner's "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" shows why we lament that master's untimely passing, and Murray Leinster's "The Ethical Equations" demonstrates the talents of our oldest practitioner. The weak spot in the book, oddly, is the Robert Heinlein story, "It's Great to Be Back," which appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1947 and has little to offer a specialized audience of s-f readers.

Two Complete Novels, by Theodore Sturgeon. *Galaxy Magazines*, 50¢. 127 pages.

This is not quite a magazine, not quite a book, and I'm not sure of its relevance in this column—except that it brings back to print two novellas by a writer whose work is always worth noticing. The format is odd, too, neither fish nor fowl; the page size is larger than that of a paperback, smaller than that of a digest-sized magazine. To complete the strangeness, the text seems to have been typed on a varityper rather than set on a linotype.

The physical curiosities of the volume are as nothing compared with the literary ones—for this

is a Sturgeon book, and therefore unlike any other. From page to page the reader goes warily, never knowing what traps the author is cannily strewing for him. The first half of the book presents ". . . And My Fear Is Great," originally published in the short-lived fantasy magazine *Beyond* in 1953. I offer no plot summaries of this one, except to say that the story centers around the damndest little old lady in all of fiction. The second novella is "Baby Is Three," from *Galaxy*, 1952. Herewith another mystery of this strange little item: for "Baby Is Three," which in itself is a powerful and probing story, happens also to be the middle section of Sturgeon's most successful book, *More Than Human*. Presumably the Ballantine edition of that classic is still in print—it deserves to be in a tenth printing by now—and so it seems a little curious to find a chunk of it turning up elsewhere. Curiouser and curiouser.

The Syndic, by Cyril Kornbluth. *Berkley Books*, 50¢. 144 pages.

Cyril Kornbluth has been dead seven years now, which means that he has been gone for a time nearly as great as the entire length of his brilliant second s-f career. I say "second" career because in his 34 years he had two distinct incarnations as a writer. When he was in his teens, he pro-

duced thirty or forty stories for the evanescent pulps of the 1939-41 period. Some of them were of astonishingly high quality and are still reprinted today. After time out for war, marriage, and a career in journalism, Kornbluth began writing s-f again in 1949, using his own name in print for the first time. Such stories as "The Little Black Bag" and "The Mindworm" quickly established him at the top of his craft, and before long he turned to the field of the novel.

His best-known novels were collaborations—"The Space Merchants" and several others with Frederik Pohl, "Mars Child" and "Gunner Cade" with Judith Merril. These were ornaments of the science fiction microcosm in the early 1950's, appearing in a frequency that did not harm their high quality at all. Less often, Kornbluth tackled novels on his own, such as this one, which was a magazine serial and a hard-cover book in 1953 and a Bantam paperback a few years later. Seeing it again reminds us how

much we lost when death silenced the acerbic, uniquely gifted Kornbluth in 1958.

Kornbluth liked to talk tough, and *The Syndic* is a tough novel about tough people in a tough world. It's not so much science fiction (there isn't any science visible in it) as it is a hard-boiled novel of a near-future civilization, worked out in loving and chilling detail. The Mob has taken over America, crime rules, and Kornbluth's people make their way in an uncertain, troubled world uncomfortably like our own.

There was potential greatness in Kornbluth, and it's our tragedy as much as his that he didn't live to fulfill it. What he left us is impressive enough, and we can fault it only by judging it against what might have been.

Noted: *To Worlds Beyond*, by Robert Silverberg. Chilton Books, \$3.95. Nine stories first published between 1956 and 1959, with an introduction by Isaac Asimov.

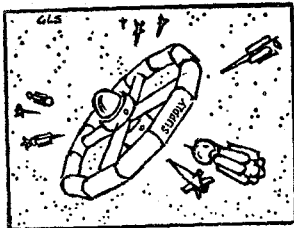
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EDITORIAL (continued from page 4)

tradition was carried on by such able editors as T. O'Connor Sloane, Ph.D., in the 1930's, Ray Palmer up through the 1940's, Howard Browne in the early 1950's, and most recently Norman Lobsenz and Cele G. Lalli), *this* magazine has published many fine science-fiction stories with startling and provocative ideas that science has not yet even approached. (Think of E. E. Smith's *The Skylark of Space* or, not so long ago, "Try to Remember" by Frank Herbert.) And even those ideas and plot-situations that science does *seem* to have approached are not really as "dated" as some might think—because while science fiction is based on scientific speculation, that speculation is offered in a *fictional* form—with characters, settings, action, feelings that breathe life into what could remain cold abstractions—and these elements, when handled by a skillful writer, preserve the story as a *story* even when some of its speculative content fades.

With this broader view then—that S-F is *fiction*, sometimes very good fiction, as well as *science*—*Amazing Stories* adopts a new policy, one we know that many readers, both old and new, will welcome. In coming issues we will draw from the past 39 years of *Amazing Stories* some first-rate fiction blended with science. That is an impressively long period for any magazine to keep pace with the times—but the credit must go (in the early years) to such popular writers as Jack Williamson, E. E. Smith, Edmond Hamilton, Murray Leinster, and David H. Keller; in our own day it belongs to a newer generation of talents like Fritz Leiber, Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon, Poul Anderson, and Isaac Asimov.

So for all you *new* readers who have never read them and for all you long-time readers who want to read them again, we will be bringing back some of the top stories that have appeared in these pages. Our standards will be simple but sound: we will try to find the best science-fiction we can, stories that *still* entertain—because their authors were talented enough to write for the future (for us) as well as for their own day.

And since this is your magazine, we would welcome any suggestions you may have to guide us in selecting the contents of future issues. So why not drop us a line.—As for you who are reading *Amazing Stories* for the first time, stay with us—and watch for some of the most entertaining stories you will ever read.

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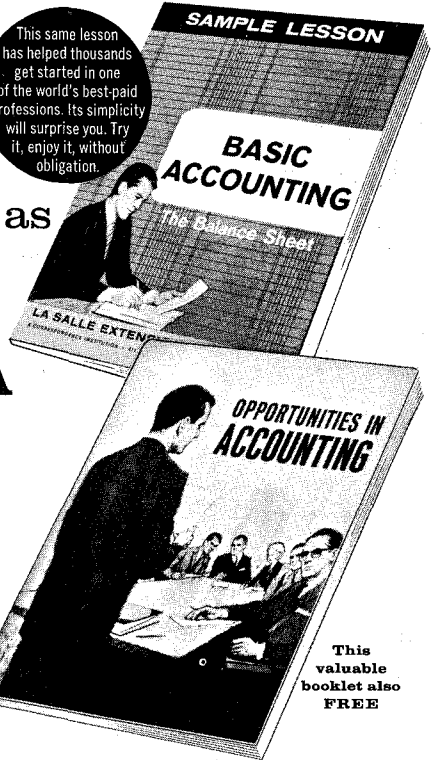
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